

THE COMMUNITY OF THE POEM

Towards an Ethics of the Poetic Spirit

With the poetry of Francis Webb

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Abstract

There is an ancient antagonism of philosophy towards poetry from the time of Plato that still casts its shadow over philosophical practice. In terms of the univocal standard in philosophy's critical discourse, poetry appears vague, ambiguous and uninformative with little or no epistemological value. Because a poem's genesis is thought to be irrational and its claims nonsensical, philosophy devalues poetic inspiration and ignores the truth to be garnered from it. Contrary to these attitudes much in poetry is of considerable relevance to the philosophical program. It is necessary to redress the imbalance caused by the unilateral dominance of critical discourse and its hermeneutic assumptions in philosophy. This thesis undertakes a re-assessment of poetry by returning it to its proper hermeneutic and existential milieu, in turn promoting a deeper appreciation of philosophical possibility from the re-introduction of poetic discourse into philosophical enquiry. Employing cross-between a Hegelian and Kierkegaardian dialectical method, this thesis situates insights gained from literary critical theory into the context of Existentialist and Personalist philosophy. Kierkegaard's dialectic has proved an appropriate methodology for a philosophy of poetry and poetic experience in its ability to rigorously maintain the tension between negatives and in its organic development of transcendent dialectical stages of increasing explanatory power, without the *necessity* required by Hegel. However, as Hegel said, truth is expressed in the whole, not merely encapsulated in its end product. A parallel discursive stream critically analyses poetry by Australian poet Francis Webb to complement and ground the philosophy in an authentic poetic voice. The consequent integrated structure fashions a negative mould making possible a further dialectical act in outlining an ethics of the poetic spirit in the thesis conclusion.

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To Wendy
For her love, support and inspiration

No plough probes deeply enough to question dust;
No power claps palate and lips to gnawed concavities;
For earth's tenacious silence locks these up.
I follow charts of guesswork, shape a cloud.
Formless, unplotted, rotten with endless change
And the sky's blue mockery plummeting through its heart.

Yet truth itself is a mass of stops and gaps.

– Francis Webb¹

¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 59-60.

Introduction:

A dialectic of the poetic spirit

I live my life in widening circles
That reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one
But I give myself to it.

– Rainer Maria Rilke¹

Poetry is vital to the well-being of philosophical thought. Without poetry, philosophy has steadily become utterly impoverished. Modern “analytical” or “positivist” philosophy, especially, has been framed within the tunnel-vision of a narrow scientific rationalism² for far too long. Yet, for philosophy to reclaim its poetic roots, it is necessary to undertake a critical discourse upon the nature of poetry and its existential dimensions. This is needed to determine the manner in which poetry can affect changes in our philosophical understanding. The current exclusive hegemony of critical discourse in philosophy dictates that this study be undertaken according to these modes. However, as I hope to show, without the balance of poetry, critical discourse tends to presumptions that are needlessly rigid and narrow in their conception of the relation of word to world. The topic of this thesis is the re-evaluation of the status of poetry, its existential consequences and its re-integration into philosophy. To this end, this thesis will include with the philosophy chapters a parallel stream of case studies on the poetry of Australian poet Francis Webb. Although these chapters extend the word-count beyond the requirements for a doctoral thesis, nevertheless, they are considered necessary to both illustrate and deepen our comprehension of the philosophy, while revealing how a poet, by dint of her or his deep reflection, is a philosopher in everything but name only. Philosophical theory combined with literary-critical theory and the critical discourse on particular poetry has a cumulative effect, enriching philosopher, literary critic and lay reader of poetry.

The philosophical debate concerning the status of poetry still occurs within the terms laid down by the two most influential of all Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Each sets the

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke (2005) *Rilke's Book of Hours*: 45.

² Max Horkheimer (2004) *Eclipse of Reason*: 40-1.

boundaries of the debate in a particular way, thereby giving us the essential direction in which philosophy is expected to accommodate poetry. Plato based his arguments upon an adversarial dispute between philosophers and poets. This immediately sets philosophy apart from, and opposed to, poetry. The student of war, he complains, can learn nothing from Homer's *Iliad*.³ His complaint originates from a peculiar reading of poetry, as if it were a source of technical information. Under these circumstances, poetry must inevitably be put at a disadvantage. As well as this distantiation of poetry from philosophy, Plato set forth the terms by which philosophy was to render its service to poetry, demanding that, should poetry be deemed of value, philosophy must be enlisted to undertake its defence. Aristotle took up this challenge, adopting Plato's terms with little demur. Aristotle embarked upon a critical description of the dramatic and epic poetry of his time and its constituent elements as the main thrust of his defence of poetry. Plato defined the terms of the debate and Aristotle defined the means by which the debate was undertaken. Accordingly, the stage was set for the future relationship between philosophy and poetry to be largely adversarial and litigious.

In my work I am undertaking to reinstate poetry to its proper place amongst our valued discourses. This, however, is neither primarily a defence of poetry nor a critical exposition of the figures of speech that comprise the poetic repertoire, in the manner of Aristotle. Nor do I accept the terms of the debate set down by Plato. A critical distinction between poetry and philosophical discourse as it is currently shaped needs to be identified in order to provide the essential contrast enabling a proper comprehension of poetry and its capabilities. This need not oppose poetry to philosophy since there is much in poetry that is relevant to philosophical questions. However, I will not be explaining poetry in terms proper to other discourses, thereby reducing poetry to a secondary form of those discourses. On the contrary, this philosophy of poetry will treat poetry according to its own manner, thereby revealing how poetry emerges as a philosophy in its own right. This in turn will promote a broader conception of philosophy, therein advancing beyond

³ Plato (1935) *The Republic of Plato*: .

the limits of scientistic positivist discourse that has tended to negate vast areas of real personal experience, and returning them to philosophical reflection.

Within this introduction, I will briefly revisit the “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and poetry, discussing how poetry has been understood in general terms, before undertaking a description of the dialectic of both Hegel and Kierkegaard informing the overall methodology of this thesis which also provides a theoretical background for the thesis as a whole. An outline of the Theory Chapters’ contents follows, prior to introducing, Francis Webb, who provides the poetic voice for this project. Finally, an outline of the Case Study Chapters featuring Webb’s poetry completes the formal content of my introduction.

The ancient quarrel

When Plato banned poetry from his ideal city he claimed that, even in his time, “there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry.”⁴ Although his treatment of poetry is inconstant and unsystematic across a number of his works – most notably *Ion*, *The Republic*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus* and also *The Symposium* – nevertheless: “Plato clearly thought that something of enormous importance hangs on his assessment of poetry.”⁵ Plato makes clear the dispute between poet and philosopher was often extremely acrimonious. *Book X* of *The Republic* presents us with a polemic against poetry. However, he announced his jaded view of poetry at the very beginning of *The Republic*. “All such things,” he says, “seem to pollute the understanding of those who hear them, unless they possess knowledge of their real nature; that is an antidote.”⁶ Defining poetry as a third imitation, three steps removed from the ontological Forms, Plato renders the poet an imitator of an imitator and the poem an imitation of an imitation. An *imitation* in this context is a pallid reflection of the truth, amounting to a mere appearance of an original God-given Form. The poet creates imitations of imitations, appearances of appearances; he is three steps from the truth and can, therefore, not be trusted to

⁴ Plato (1935) *The Republic of Plato*: 607, 311.

⁵ Charles Griswold (2009) “Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry”: Ch. 1

⁶ Plato (1935) *The Republic of Plato*: 297, 296.

present a truthful report. Homer, for example, neither provides a model for heroism nor guidance for warfare. Following his discussion of imitation and the Forms, Plato embarked on a discussion of good and evil, describing them as “that which preserves and benefits” for the former and “that which destroys and corrupts” for the latter. In this regard, it is clear Plato impugns poetry as a *disease of the soul*, an evil that destroys and corrupts the soul from emotions that overtake the soul and lead it astray, away from the calm dissertation of the philosopher. The poet, Plato says in the *Ion*, is the stone and iron link that tethers all his followers to the erratic chain of inspiration and possession.⁷ Plato’s image of the possessed and inspired poet, out of his senses and losing all reason,⁸ is a powerful, if misleading, image that has dominated much discussion of poetry since his time. This persistent attitude explains the need to cleanse the ideal city-state of the pollution and corruption of poetry.

Yet Plato left the back door open for poetry to return to the Republic. But it is not the poets he allows to defend their craft. Rather, the defence must be in the prose of a philosopher’s critical discourse:

And we might also allow her champions, who are not poets, but lovers of poetry, to publish a prose defence on her behalf, showing that she is not only pleasant but also useful for political constitutions and for human life, and we shall listen with friendly feelings. For it will be to our profit if she is made out to be not only pleasant, but useful.⁹

Although Aristotle took up Plato’s challenge in *The Poetics*, nevertheless, he conceived poetry in terms similar to those outlined by Plato, especially those of the *Ion*. *The Poetics* that has come down to us is probably corrupted and consists solely of his work on tragedy and epic poetry. His reputed work on comedy failed to survive. Aristotle also limits his discussion to epic and dramatic poetry, those which focus on plot. He barely mentions lyric poetry. The presence of a plot enables Aristotle to argue a social use of poetry. Poetry, he says, does not have the

⁷ Plato (1987a) *Early Socratic Dialogues*: 533d, 54-55.

⁸ Plato (1987a) *Early Socratic Dialogues*: 534a-b, 55.

⁹ Plato (1935) *The Republic of Plato*: 607, 311.

function of telling how things really happened.¹⁰ That, he says, is the function of history. Were Herodotus to write his history in metre and verse, it would still be history. On the contrary, poetry tells of things that *might* have happened. He holds that poetry is, accordingly, much more like philosophy and, therefore, far more worthy of serious attention than history, because while history records particular facts, poetry concerns itself with universal truths:

[T]he poet must be a maker of plots rather than of verses, since he is a poet by virtue of his representation, and what he represents is actions. And even if he writes about things that have actually happened, that does not make him any the less a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some of the things that have happened from being in accordance with the laws of possibility and probability, and thus he will be a poet in writing about them.¹¹

Yet Aristotle, at the same time, allows the poet certain figures of speech that, in other modes of discourse, would be considered faults. For example, were impossibilities to be depicted, that he said would be a fault indeed under normal circumstances. However, impossibilities are entirely justified in poetry, providing they attain their true end by rendering the poem more striking.¹²

Aristotle's most celebrated use for poetry lies in the theory of catharsis: "[B]y means of pity and fear to bring about the purgation of such emotions."¹³ The theory of catharsis has been taken as a psychology of maintaining social order through the presentation in theatre and subsequent exorcism of violent emotion that might otherwise disrupt the order of the polis. However, the very existence of the mask in Greek theatre belies the fallacy at the heart of this translation of "catharsis". Without the masks, the violence and despair of, for example, Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, becomes simply unbearable for its audience.¹⁴ That is, without this technique of presentation, tragedy would normally leave its audience agog. A recent radio production of *The Trojan Women* was a litany of despair, overloading its listeners with such

¹⁰ Aristotle (1965) "On the Art of Poetry": Ch. 9, 43.

¹¹ Aristotle (1965) "On the Art of Poetry": Ch. 9, 44.

¹² Aristotle (1965) "On the Art of Poetry": Ch. 25, 70.

¹³ Aristotle (1965) "On the Art of Poetry": Ch. 6, 39.

¹⁴ A detailed discussion of the mask in the theatre is undertaken in Theory Chapter 6: "On Community".

emotions as to leave little possibility for the purgation of these emotions. Given that Euripides had a particular political motive in writing this play,¹⁵ the perdurance of such emotions overwhelming his audience would have disrupted the political debate the playwright hoped to promote. The use of the mask enabled the infusion of reasoned debate and deliberation by the audience throughout its presentation on stage. Whatever other stylistic methodologies were employed, we cannot be sure, but inspiring and purging profound emotions from its audience would have left them indifferent to the suffering of others and, most importantly, unable to discuss such suffering with sympathy. Nor was the notion of the social order achieved by catharsis, if true, in keeping with Aristotle's ethics and its emphasis on deliberation and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). If, however, we return to the contexts in which Aristotle made his celebrated remarks, we discover that he was describing the structural constitution of the tragic play. Gerard Else, in his translation and commentary on *The Poetics*, argues "catharsis" should be thought of as the moment in the *plot* of a tragedy when the blood-guilt, incurred from acts transgressing the divine-natural order, is finally expiated in a rite of purification.¹⁶ The masked figure serves as the intermediary between audience and the terrible event to engender a proper relation with this event, thereby short-circuiting any necessity for "catharsis" in the modern sense of the term. I will be returning to the importance of the mask in a later chapter. Expiating the blood-guilt in the plot of the poetic work fulfils the ethical significance of great weight for its original audience. A prime example of this occurs when Sophocles' Oedipus confronts his true identity, resulting in a horrific act of self-blinding, violently emulating the blind seer Teiresias and signifying his acquisition of forbidden knowledge. Were this symbolism forgotten, the play would have lost its primary significance. On the one hand, great emotion is portrayed but, on the other, the symbolic value stands of greater significance for Sophocles' audience. Questions of

¹⁵ Dudley Fitts (1958) "Introduction to the Trojan Women": in David Grene and Richard Lattimore eds. *Euripides III*: 122-124.

¹⁶ Gerald F. Else (1957) *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*: 228-30; 423-47.

ambiguity in the play's language reflect on the nature of personal identity of great moment for its audience.¹⁷

We can discount the theory of catharsis as pertaining to the audience and, instead, rely on Aristotle's juxtaposition of history and poetry for an adequate account of the Aristotelian position on poetry. Like so much philosophy of poetry, Aristotle's study provides a defence of poetry in the manner advocated by Plato. Most philosophical studies of poetry defend poetry without passing beyond the need for that defence, thereby leaving Plato's challenge unchallenged in turn. At least Aristotle aimed for an exhaustive anatomy of poetic forms with particular reference to dramatic and epic poetry. Similar anatomies of poetry in recent times have been undertaken, not by philosophers but by literary critics, such as Northrop Frye and William Wimsatt, or by poets speaking for their own craft from Coleridge and P. B. Shelley down to T.S. Eliot and Seamus Heaney.

When philosophy involves poetry, only that poetry which advances the philosophical programme is considered. Heidegger's use of Hölderlin, amongst others, is a notable example. Poetry, even here, is made to march in time with philosophy. Much comes to be overlooked in those aspects of poetry with no suitable material for philosophical discourse. The approach taken in my essay aims to redress the balance by allowing the poet's voice and, taking my cue from Paul Ricoeur, allowing the literary critical voice to inform this philosophical discourse thereby extending the possibilities open to philosophy while creating a much more realistic conception of poetry and its value.

This project grew out of a desire to develop a poetics of ecology, rather like Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, but specifically to address eco-philosophy's ethical dimensions. The recognition of the relationships enshrined in poetry makes this a very real possibility. However, in order to accomplish such a poetics, a comprehensive study of poetry needed to be undertaken. Very like the intuition that initiates Hegel's dialectical process, of which more below, the

¹⁷Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 124.

recognition of poetic relationships serves as the initiating intuition providing the context for much of what follows. My primary project was not to answer Plato's challenge by revealing a valid use for poetry in the form of a poetics of ecology but to reinstate poetry's primacy as a discourse of relationship in order to redefine the human relation with the natural environment. As it is, the final achievement of an ethics of the poetic spirit, outlined in the conclusion, has proved sufficient for this project. The further question of a poetics of ecological ethics must be left to the future.

Rationalism and poetry

Poetry is necessary for redressing an imbalance. The dominance of a narrow scientific rationalism denies reality to vast areas of human experience that have been barely acknowledged if acknowledged at all. Every aspect of modern living has been inculcated by these rationalist discourses within and behind the scientific endeavour,¹⁸ including the politics and policy of government,¹⁹ especially in its adoption of "economic rationalism", and even the religious experience of God,²⁰ experience one would have expected to be of a highly intimate character and, therefore, free of impersonal rationalist discourse. Personal experience has been greatly diluted to the point where any truly personal knowledge is denied, or at least its *connection* with the personal is repressed.²¹ Psychology, for example, in its desire to deny its origin in the humanities, has thus cast itself in a scientific rationalist mode whereby the mind, surely the most intimately personal of entities, has been universalized as *the Mind*. Still dominated by Cartesian dualism, the Mind has little intimate connection with the world in which it develops, except in the utterly mechanistic sense of the "stimulus", such that any truly personal phenomena not

¹⁸ Max Horkheimer (2004) *Eclipse of Reason*: 40. Horkheimer remarked that the best possibilities of science were not being realized in society. The positivist championing of science (and, one might add, the almost religious fervour in which science is upheld to be the only route to universal truth) forgets that science is an auxiliary process of [capitalist] production within the general trend of economics (40-41).

¹⁹ Deborah Stone. (2002) *The Policy Paradox*: 233.

²⁰ Karen Armstrong (2009) *The Case for God*: 200.

²¹ Adorno & Horkheimer wrote: "The multitudinous affinities between existents are suppressed by the single relation between the subject who bestows meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and the chance vehicle of significance." Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 10-11.

recognized by this narrow rationalist creed is *explained away* according to a discourse of “internal” random effects and thus judged “hallucinatory” in some way. The Cartesian frame identifies that which is *uncertain* with *falsehood*. So-called “objective reality” stands separate from the “subjective” space of the Mind. Unusual personal experiences, such as clairvoyance events, are simply denied, although insights derived from quantum physics, such as from Bell’s Theorem, might give sufficient reason for reconsidering them. As this narrow rationalism has invaded the most personal of spaces, it leaves very little room for different modes of discourse to flourish. Poetry, in this intellectual paradigm, is treated either in a technical manner or as pertaining solely to the “subjective” realm, which comes to be identified with the non-cognitive mental processes of emotion and “unconscious processes” but not with cognitive judgement intrinsic to the intellect and its reasoning, which remains the sole preserve of scientific rationalism and its allied disciplines. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote: “There is to be no mystery—which means, too, no wish to reveal mystery.”²² Accordingly, the humanities are quickly becoming abrogated to the so-called “social sciences”. Adorno and Horkheimer also wrote:

With Kant’s consequent, full confirmation of the scientific system as the form of truth, thought seals its own nullity, for science is technical practice, as far removed from reflective consideration of its own goal as are other forms of labor under the pressure of the system.²³

Postmodernism’s universal relativism,²⁴ devolving judgement onto the depersonalized discourses typical of science, represents, in my view, the *reductio ad absurdum* of scientistic rationalism. Its claim to decentralize power away from centres of social authority doesn’t follow from its abolition of the personal voice. How much this is an assertion of a scientistic rationalism

²² Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 5.

²³ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 85.

²⁴ Indeed, Derrida takes this depersonalisation to an extreme by abolishing even the universal relativism which allows some personal input. His stated claim to maintain the self as a centre, also determined that self to be a “function” not a being. Foucault, although strictly not a “postmodernist” as such, placed his emphasis upon *mentalité* in his historical study of the human sciences, *The Order of Things*, thereby removing all personal vocation from history.

can be gauged from Adorno and Horkheimer: “The derivation of thought from logic ratifies in the lecture room the reification of man in the factory and the office.”²⁵ Rather, decentralising power results from strengthening the personal voice by allowing people their own voices based upon their own personal judgements. Whereas the objective or critical discourses of science and analytical philosophy abolish the personal voice – although paradoxically the person retains a marginal if devalued role in the creativity that gives rise to new discoveries – poetry depends intimately on both the personal voice of the poet and the personal judgement of the reader. Therefore, poetry provides the personal discourse *par excellence* for returning us to a proper relation with each other and with the world. Therein, we arrive at its ethical value while acknowledging the personal knowledge necessary for each of us to be a whole being in relation with others in our community. But we have a considerable way to go before arriving at these conclusions.

This narrow rationalism has its discursive counterpart in what I will call “critical discourse” although it also goes under different titles, such as “analytical discourse” and “objective discourse” and so on. Critical discourse is not, strictly speaking, a narrow rationalism as such. Much philosophy, especially existentialism, maintains its critical discourse against this tendency to rationalism. However, critical discourse does lend itself to the *development* of a narrow rationalism if there are no mitigating circumstances to balance this internal tendency. This tendency follows from its central project of obtaining *clarity*.²⁶ Because ordinary language and speech is fundamentally ambiguous, riddled with vagueness, equivocity and polysemy, by necessity considerable time has to be given over to a process of *qualification*, by which ambiguity, or equivocity, is reduced towards univocal signification, a “purified word”: “Instead of making the object experiential,” wrote Adorno and Horkheimer, “the purified word treats it as

²⁵ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 30.

²⁶ That clarity can also be the means of *hiding* contradiction is testified to by Adorno & Horkheimer: “The difficulties in the concept of reason caused by the fact that its subjects, the possessors of that very reason, contradict one another, are concealed by the apparent clarity of the judgements of the Western enlightenment.” Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 83.

an abstract instance, and everything else (now excluded by the demand for ruthless clarity from expression—itsself now banished) fades away in reality.”²⁷ Indeed, the fact of qualification typifies critical discourse. One may picture critical qualification as the *convergence of the hermeneutical circle*, narrowing the distance between expectations and escaping horizons of description, within which interpretation is accomplished. The most univocal of speech is technical language, employed to short-circuit the cycle of interpretation with predetermined definitive limitations. The danger with using technical languages – in particular those employing ordinary words as terms with specific definitions – lies in the ambiguity between what is being employed at any one time: ordinary word meaning or technical term denotation. In either case, the need for clarity calls for further qualification. Yet, owing to the ambiguous self-recursion of language, (that language requires language to define itself) the ideal of univocity is only achieved, ultimately, in a mathematical-mode in which the symbol erases the ontological value of the word. Aside from the attempts of univocity by analytical logic, philosophical discourse remains systemically equivocal, its univocity only sporadic at best.

Poetry presents us with a profoundly different mode of discourse from critical discourse and therein lays its great ability to counterbalance the dominance of critical discourse with its tendency to a narrow rationalism. However, although poetry’s difference from critical discourse engenders the furtherance of our description of poetry and its potentials, nevertheless the significance of poetry does not reside in this difference but in poetry’s own being. We are not merely speaking of poetry as a “mode of discourse”, which implicitly renders critical discourse the normative mode of discourse, but of something altogether existential in which language escapes the straitjacket of a purely semantic denotation. Poetry employs ambiguity in a special way rather than mitigating its effects. This opens the way for inviting the reader’s participation in dialogue with the personal voice of the poet. By taking a stand in the relationships embodied by the poetry, we make a personal affirmation. Yet readers will not be forced to take a particular

²⁷ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 164.

“point of view” – a metaphor derived from the mathematical “perspective” of delineating geometrics – but be able to encompass their own response within intimate relations with the world to which the poem points. In many respects, one could claim that poetry embodies relation not judgement, if this weren’t overly simplistic. In these senses, poetry opens up experiences that are debarred by the depersonalisation intrinsic to critical discourse and the rationalism project. Consequently, poetry has value not merely as an adjunct to philosophy but as *philosophy in its own right*. The justification of this proposition forms my fundamental project: What kind of philosophy does poetry manifest? And how is it to be read to realise its value in addressing our being in the world?

At some point, the discipline of philosophy needs to encompass ways of acknowledging the relation with the world other than its nominal “objectivity” in order to reach a broader conception of truth. Truth exists not only in the object before one or in the propositional content of an assertion but also in the reality of the relationship one actually has with other being and in the depth of one’s response to it. That response has the potential to unlock profound knowledge barely glimpsed by rigid rationalist objectivity. Consider the relation with a forest. Certainly values are encapsulated in that relationship. We can, for example, consider only the economic value according to timber-feet, the volume and monetary price of saw-logs or wood-chips. One can consider the aesthetic values in the forest’s beauty or the environmental values inherent in an old-growth forest as a carbon-sink. Such values are important to provide society with timber, paper, tourism or assisting in the prevention of global warming. Yet all these values are solely focused on a restricted sense of social utility, including aesthetic values; restricted indeed to a mathematical formalism that seems to be judged more realer than the real. All consider the forest as an object or, in Martin Buber’s terms, as an *It*.²⁸ Adorno & Horkheimer wrote:

Mathematical formalism, however, whose medium is number, the most abstract form of the immediate, instead holds thinking firmly to mere immediacy. Factuality wins the day; cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought

²⁸ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 7-8.

becomes mere tautology. The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence.²⁹

However, the deeply personal response intrinsic to poetry opens up the deep being of the forest itself and its inhabitants in an entirely different way, beyond our mere subjectivity and its narrow so-called objective desires, also beyond the shallow aesthetic values, the area to which poetry is usually confined by philosophy. This calls for a reintegration of ourselves in relation with other beings in a manner similar to Martin Buber's *I-Thou*, or, in some respects, a *negative* to the radical bracketing of the personal – or “epoché” – advocated by Edmund Husserl.³⁰ The word “personal” really reflects our *whole person* and not merely parts of a divided self. Usually we conceive of ourselves according to certain isolated faculties such as the “intellect”, supposedly our cognitive or objective faculty, or the “emotions”, supposedly our non-cognitive or subjective faculty, and so on. But only a fully integrated person will be able realize a relationship with the world and other beings such that knowledge and knowing is rendered complete. Narrow rationalism represents a part of the person pretending to be the whole.

While critical discourse remains the dominant, indeed the *sole* form of writing currently accepted by the philosophical profession, even under this regimen, nevertheless, poetry can provide a primary means of access to the personal world. In the past, philosophy was often expressed in poetry. One merely has to recall Lao Tzu's masterpiece, the *Tao Te Ching*, to realize there were times and places when poetry and philosophy were not antagonists. The so-called war between poetry and philosophy is not actually “part of the eternal history,” as claimed by H.S. Harris.³¹ To state otherwise is to ignore the relativity of philosophy to the age in which it is articulated. Only certain philosophies maintain the “ancient quarrel”, many others are far more amenable to dialogue with poetic reality.

Reading poetry as a philosophy entails more than the reading of poetry from a philosophical point of view, whatever that philosophical point of view might be. We are not

²⁹ Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1979) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 27.

³⁰ Edmund Husserl (1965) *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*: 168.

³¹ H. S. Harris (1994) “Philosophy and poetry: the war renewed?": 406.

scouring the written documents for material that bears directly upon certain philosophical issues. Such a shallow reading of poetry would skew interpretation of the poetry towards a mere commentary upon philosophy, thus negating what is central to poetic experience. Philosophy will then have learnt nothing from poetry. Reading poetry begins with understanding what ontological dimensions comprise the poetic experience, therefore discerning what poetry can contribute to philosophy. For example, unless we identify the nature of poetic metaphor and its consequences, our reading of poetry will simply become mired in a legion of logical contradictions, each one a barrier to the normal claims of logical consistency that dominate philosophical discourse. Yet the presumption of coherence and consistency of a philosophical argument itself presents a significant problem. They cannot act as guarantors of its validity. Rationalism is based upon certain assumptions that cannot be proved by rationalism. Formalist categorisation is not merely another form of category, even of thought. Therefore, unless we can reach a critical accommodation of such contradictions as emerge in poetic metaphor, then poetry will become a philosophical problem rather than a response to the human condition that renders it valuable to philosophy. We, therefore, require a philosophical methodology that recognizes the oppositional thinking within contradiction and the values incorporated in the existential tension that results, and is able to encompass poetic experience according to a series of discrete if related stages that also fulfils the philosophical project. The philosophical method most appropriate to this particular path was first developed by Hegel.

Hegel's dialectic

Within poetry, and specifically in poetic metaphor, lies a significant internal contradiction between the literary *is* and its literal, if unspoken, *is not*. The very presence of this copula and its implied negation already points us towards the dialectical method which can be used to unlock the significance of poetry in terms appropriate to poetry and its experience. By following the formalism of Hegelian dialectic and the existential dialectic of Kierkegaard, I develop an active procession of thought from the commonplace notion of poetic indeterminacy, step by step, to an ethics of the poetic spirit. Each step, or “stage”, articulates that which lies

silent in foregoing chapters, largely because the discourses used to describe the earlier could not be used to articulate the later. Yet, the earlier stages do point to the later even if they cannot articulate them. At least two chapters – “On Enrichment” and “On Affirmation” – describe what happens in the relation between two stages of thought – Incompleteness and Mystery – and, therefore, represent particular dialectical moments in themselves, each serving as a specific synthesis.

The dialectical process is, at heart, an organic process that can be used in many more dimensions than the straightforward but rather one-dimensional mechanism (thesis-antithesis-synthesis) commonly ascribed to it. The conception of the dialectic that began with Hegel introduces an organic and living methodology that has been vital in promoting the alternative philosophies of Kierkegaard and Marx and in the ultimate creation of many movements in modern philosophy, notably Existentialism, developed largely from Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy, and Murray Bookchin’s Social Ecology.³² It is imperative, therefore, to undertake a description of Hegel’s dialectical system and grasp what is multidimensional about it that makes it so pertinent for developing a discourse on the philosophy of poetry.

In the opening of the Preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel employs a metaphor to describe the unfolding of philosophical truth both in an organic historical context and according to a particular philosophical development:

The bud disappears when the blossom breaks through, and we might say that the former is refuted by the latter; in the same way when the fruit comes, the blossom may be explained to be a false form of the plant’s existence, for the fruit appears as its true nature in place of the blossom. These stages are not merely differentiated; they supplant one another as being incompatible with one another. But the ceaseless activity of their own inherent nature makes them at the same time moments of an organic unity, where they not merely do not contradict one

³² Murray Bookchin (1990) “Postscript: Ecologizing the Dialectic” in John Clark ed. *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology*: 202-216 *passim*.

another, but where one is as necessary as the other; and this equal necessity of all moments constitutes alone and thereby the life of the whole.³³

Hegel's dialectic process commences by grasping the Absolute, not at first articulated in a conceptual form but according to a feeling or an intuition, a direct and unmediated understanding of the world: "[I]t is not its conception, but the feeling of it and intuition of it that are to have the say and find expression."³⁴ In the *Phenomenology*, this initial *consciousness* propels forward to *self-consciousness* and to reason, in which the desire to know the whole leads irrevocably to action. Desire, in Hegelian terms, represents a need to negate the present through a *telos* of the future³⁵: "It is the process of its own becoming, the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose, and has its end for its beginning; it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves."³⁶ The dialectical process feels its way forward in a teleological manner towards a complete intellectual grasping of the Absolute, guided by its initial intuition.

The traditional description of the Hegelian dialectic uses the terms "thesis", "antithesis" and "synthesis" as the consecutive stages in the process. However, nowhere in the Hegelian corpus is this triadic description evident.³⁷ The only mention of a triadic schema is attributed by Hegel to Kant: "[A] method rediscovered, to begin with, by instinctive insight, but left lifeless and uncomprehended."³⁸ Taken on its own, the traditional triadic description of Hegel's dialectic identifies a narrow rationalistic, one dimensional, mechanical process in which one stage by necessity follows the other, without the personal involvement of the investigator. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather than the univocal technical term "antithesis", Hegel uses the vital word "negative" in the *Phenomenology* to signify several different but organically interrelated ideas. These include: 1. the negation as an antithesis of what went before it; 2. the

³³ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Tr. J. B. Baillie): 11.

³⁴ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 13.

³⁵ George L. Kline (1970) "The Dialectic of Action and Passion in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*": 679-80.

³⁶ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 17.

³⁷ Thora Ilin Bayer (2009) "Hegelian rhetoric": 110.

³⁸ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 30.

negation by theoretical abstract thought of the intuitive immediacy of experience, the feeling that gives impetus to the whole process; 3. the negative space within the positive mould, a metaphor derived from the Industrial Revolution then sweeping across Europe; 4. that which cannot yet be articulated because it embodies discourses distinct from those enframing the currently articulated concepts; 5. the negative co-existing with the positive as a complementary duality, and 6. the dark negative that arises from the positive light of history, for example, in the Terror that came in the wake of the early optimism of the French Revolution as expounded in the Tennis Court Oath and the freedom slogan: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” In the *Phenomenology*, the dialectical system is a multidimensional and organic process towards the creation of complete knowledge – literally “Absolute Knowledge”, the conclusion to the *Phenomenology*.

The two dimensions of his new “science of philosophy”, both absent from the philosophy of the Enlightenment in which Hegel was educated, were: 1. the active development and progression of thought, identified as “Becoming” in the *Logic*, and 2. living being, organisms that grow and change but still retain their essential identity. Much of Hegel’s polemic in the *Phenomenology* argues against the static and lifeless categories of the then current philosophy of the Enlightenment that found its apotheosis in Kant, although Hegel was not restrained by the new Romanticism then sweeping through the arts.³⁹ In many respects, his aim was to bring the systemic realities outlined by the Enlightenment into a single dynamic system with the organic realities identified by the Romantic Movement, without being trapped by either one or in simple combination.⁴⁰ His portrait of change in history ushering in new paradigmatic eras bears a considerable resemblance to the evolutionary ideas published by Charles Darwin half a century later⁴¹ and, perhaps more, to Thomas Kuhn’s structures of scientific revolutions: Slow changes, piece by piece, gradually break down the old order, until the dawn at a single stroke reveals the new paradigm in relief, and the old order is swept away.⁴² But although the new paradigm has

³⁹ Thora Ilin Bayer (2009) “Hegelian rhetoric”: 207

⁴⁰ Charles Taylor (1975) *Hegel*: 46-7.

⁴¹ Note: Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 118-121.

⁴² Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 15.

appeared, it is, as Hegel says, but a building whose foundations have only just been laid. The building needs to be completely constructed before the whole of its truth comes to be realized: “The truth is the whole,” Hegel wrote. “The whole, however, is merely the essential nature reaching its completeness through the process of its own development.”⁴³ Truth emerges from a process that begins in the intuitive, soon to be negated by the abstract – to say “all animals” does not pass for zoology⁴⁴ – expressing an immediate intuition of the end of the process, towards which it progresses.

Reason, in Hegel’s view, is purposive activity,⁴⁵ a stage of the whole mind.⁴⁶ The living substance is that which is truly subject and truly realized as solely positing itself, or in mediating within its own self its transitions from one state or position to the opposite.⁴⁷ The dialectic occurs as an organic self-movement of the whole towards its own realization. And the final destination is absolute knowledge, the intimation of which, according to Hegel, had instigated the process in the first place. We are, therefore, players in the movement of absolute knowledge towards its own realization. This constitutes the life of the investigator in the living movement of the absolute as it steps stage by stage towards its completion in absolute truth. The subject-object relation, still typical of science, is abolished by the intense involvement of the subject in the living movement of thought and actuality. The movement represents self-growth by the whole system in which the person is profoundly inculcated.

Both Kierkegaard and Marx maintained the claim to totality that is the most troubling feature of Hegel’s thinking.⁴⁸ Here I part company with Hegel because my aims are far more modest than seeking “absolute knowledge”. Hegel’s dialectic relies on the relativity of its stages and his absolutism proves to be relative to them and the immediate intuition that constitutes the first act in the dialectic. If the historical dialectic is consistent throughout, should the

⁴³ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 18.

⁴⁴ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 18.

⁴⁵ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 19.

⁴⁶ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 107.

⁴⁷ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 17.

⁴⁸ Robert Heiss (1975) *Hegel Kierkegaard Marx*: 107.

embodiment of so-called “absolute knowledge” be achieved, other alternative views of the world arise, have perhaps already arisen and are in process of being constructed piece by piece towards their future triumph, to be replaced in turn by other, as yet, unimagined world-views. Hegel says as much in the conclusion to the *Phenomenology*.⁴⁹ “Absolute knowledge” serves as but a stage in the on-going movement of history and remains, itself, relative. His description carries this implication: “[S]pirit which at once gives its complete and true content the form of self, and thereby realizes its notion, and in doing so remains within its own notion.”⁵⁰ Hegel did not mention the possibility of an anti-Hegelian world-view that might perhaps arise from the new dialectical method he pioneered.⁵¹ However, it also has been argued that Hegel considered the Absolute to be a mysterious and unattainable knowledge. Thora Bayer thus argued:

Absolute knowing as understood through the theory of the double *Ansich* is not a final synthesis of all the stages of consciousness into a unified whole. Instead it is precisely the realization by consciousness that all of its previous attempts at synthesis are specific forms of illusion. Absolute knowing is ultimate human wisdom—the acceptance of things as they are.⁵²

Given Hegel’s claim that the dialectical method in thought is the means by which actuality unfolds, absolute knowing is *not* a discrediting of the prior steps leading to it, as Bayer believes. On the contrary, Hegel himself said it early in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

But the ceaseless activity of their own inherent nature makes them at the same time moments of an organic unity, where they not merely do not contradict one another, but where one is as necessary as the other; and this equal necessity of all moments constitutes alone and thereby the life of the whole.⁵³

Hegel always maintained a belief in the Absolute throughout his works. The relativity, as I argue it to be, of Hegel’s Absolute does not, however, disprove either the truth or effectiveness

⁴⁹ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 366.

⁵⁰ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 360.

⁵¹ Albert Camus (1962) *The Rebel*: 104.

⁵² Thora Ilin Bayer (2009) “Hegelian rhetoric”: 211.

⁵³ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Tr. J. B. Baillie): 11.

of the dialectical method. On the contrary, it reveals the power of the dialectic itself to abolish such “absolutes” and with it the desire for the knowledge of gods that such “absolutes” encourage.⁵⁴ An important consequence of the dialectical method lies in its provision of an incremental expansion of thought, allowing for stages of growth, exactly as Hegel laid down in his flower-bud metaphor. Because we are adopting Hegel’s much broader conception of the “negative” than the singularly inadequate definition of “antithesis” alone, we can mark up that which is not articulated or unable to be articulated in prior stages. For example, the Marceline mystery in poetic metaphor of the second Theory Chapter cannot be articulated within the structural terms of incompleteness and poetic indeterminacy of the first Theory Chapter. The existential conceptions of the second chapter cannot be reduced to the structural conceptions of the first. Yet the later chapter depends on that which is unspoken in the earlier chapter which *points* towards the later chapter. The dialectic method enables our passing from one stage to the next by asserting the unspoken negative in the positive statements of the previous chapter. And like the blossom “disproving” the bud, which is really but two stages of the whole plant’s growth, so the later stages might appear to disprove those earlier, although indeed they are but stages in the development of the whole.

Yet, because Hegel’s dialectic maintains certain premises that make it less suitable for this project, I will turn to Kierkegaard’s dialectic which has features that make it more suitable. However, I cannot slavishly follow Kierkegaard’s project for a number of reasons that will, become apparent in the next section. Above all, Kierkegaard’s ambivalent attitude to poetry itself where he tends to limit it to the aesthetic stage, especially in the words of his pseudonymous author Judge William.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the Young Man in *Repetition* (by Constantine Constantius) who attains to become a poet exhibits aspects of being that link him firmly to the ethico-religious stage.⁵⁶ Kierkegaard’s attitude to poetry remains ambiguous, perhaps as a

⁵⁴ Jacob Bronowski (1973) *The Ascent of Man*:

⁵⁵ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 460-1.

⁵⁶ Søren Kierkegaard. (2009) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*.

consequence of the pseudonymous authors through whom Kierkegaard wrote his most enduring works.

Kierkegaard's dialectic

Hegel's dialectic imposes a *necessity* that renders the inevitability of the Absolute in thought, in human development and in history. The enforcement of this logic serves a strict determination that while leaving human decision aside involves the whole person in its unfolding. Anyone with the capacity to follow Hegel's logic could climb to the Absolute in the mind of God, the structure of the universe. Kierkegaard upbraided this thought as supremely arrogant as if it were building a new tower of Babel or a *scala paradise* to climb with ease up to heaven.⁵⁷ Hegel also claimed that the very nature of his dialectic was the mode by which actuality came into being. Altogether, this is not an uncommon attitude, as Hegel clearly recognised by identifying his philosophy by the term "science". Scientists today still assume their mode of thinking is the very manner in which material being comes into being. On the contrary, Kierkegaard considered his dialectical method as a methodology of thought alone, while actuality operated according to its own rules. Therefore, although Kierkegaard's dialectic bears many similarities with Hegel, nevertheless, it also contains many differences. However, Kierkegaard's debt to Hegel is profound.

It is possible that one can be positioned within a single "stage" or set lingering on the point of movement from one stage to another. Kierkegaard's existential dialectic invokes the method of Hegel in a somewhat stuttering way, without *necessity* accomplishing the manoeuvre from one "stage" to another. Room for the next stage was rendered by each, but the step from one to the other had to be performed as a personal "choice" in a very problematic manoeuvre. He recognised the need for a *leap* of the will to obtain this manoeuvre from possibility to actuality.⁵⁸ This creative leap comes only at the moment of human decision, and yet sometimes, even then, the decision requires a grace from beyond the self that might not be forthcoming. The reflective

⁵⁷ William McDonald. (2012) "Søren Kierkegaard": n. p.

⁵⁸ Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 133.

Aesthete, for example, is quite conscious of his limitations and the nature of the aestheticism binding him to certain behaviours in order to subordinate his ever-present ennui. The transcendence to the “ethical stage”, of which Judge William speaks in *Either/Or II*, requires more than an externalised knowledge of the self. This is why Judge William says to the young aesthete (and to us) that “the I chooses itself”⁵⁹ and “choose [your] despair”.⁶⁰ Kierkegaard professes an existential decision that reaches to the core of what it is to be an actual person. Kierkegaard has become known as the “father of Existentialism” precisely because of his concentration on the actuality of human existence, although this arises as a consequence of his religious intention on how to be a (true) Christian in Christendom:

The philosophers think that all knowledge, yes, even the existence of the deity, is something man himself produces and that revelation can be referred to only in a figurative sense, in somewhat the same sense as one may say the rain falls down from heaven, although the rain is nothing but an earth-produced mist; but they forget, to keep the metaphor, that in the beginning God separated the waters of the heaven and of the earth and that there is something higher than *the atmosphere*.⁶¹

While not deprecatory of human knowledge (i.e. science), there is no doubt that Kierkegaard, in all his writings (both under his pseudonymous authors and the *Edifying Discourses* written in his own name), lend themselves to reaching the ultimate existential confrontation with God in the final “religious stage B”. He saw himself as a creative writer as well as a philosopher, but predominantly a Christian philosopher confronting his fellow Christians with difficult, uncomfortable thought to shake them to the foundations. The term *existentialist* is useful in gauging the modern significance of his writing. However, it properly belongs to the twentieth-century as a title applied to those philosophers who generally identify their antecedents in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, amongst others. Nevertheless, we shall use it as shorthand to include those philosophers who engaged in the existential critique of

⁵⁹ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 491.

⁶⁰ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 513.

⁶¹ q. in Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 124-5.

humanity, although they might not properly be Existentialists. It is within this experience of human existence that this thesis takes its major cues.

For Kierkegaard, Hegelian discourse focused upon a mono-dimensional logic propelling his lineal program of necessity. As my comments above show, Hegel's dialectical negative was not a mono-dimensional process as Kierkegaard believed. However, Kierkegaard responded to his perception of Hegel's mono-dimensional linearity by outlining a multiplicity of factors involved in personal actuality. These remained relatively consistent throughout his writings especially in the pseudonymous writings: Judge William, for example, paid particular attention to the finitude-infinity juxtaposition (*Either/Or II*), and Anti-Climacus focused on the critical juxtapositions of finitude-infinity, necessity-possibility and temporal-eternal (*Sickness Unto Death*). Further coupled-concepts can be inferred from these, including being-essence and quantity-quality, all expressing the same fundamental relationship between a practical life on the earth and that pertaining to the religious sphere.⁶² The triad of *cognition-feeling-will* provided the matrix by which his hierarchised dualisms⁶³ were to play out in the life of the person. Thus, these multiple factors required addressing in each different stage, stages clearly described in the three parts by "various persons compiled [...] by Hilarius Bookbinder" in *Stages on Life's Way*: the Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious stages. As Malantschuk said:

In this way there is corroboration of the insights that in thought and in existence there are many factors which must be considered at the same time; when thought and existence are developed properly, they both move along many lines are not one-track and merely "linear."⁶⁴

The *longitudinal* program underlying Kierkegaard's dialectic lay in his critique of the Christian life, moving from stage to stage. In this regard we can recognise the debt he owed to Hegel's dialectic as a philosophy of becoming, in which the truth lay in the whole of the developmental process and not as its end product. The teleology of Hegel's Absolute recurred in

⁶² Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 129.

⁶³ "Dual hierarchised oppositions" is an expression of Helen Cixous. (1981) "Sorties" in Marks, E. & I. de Courtivron eds. *New French Feminisms*: 91.

⁶⁴ Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 131.

Kierkegaard's existential Christian mission; in Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion* Christianity is expressed as the "Absolute Religion". It must be reiterated that this developmental movement was not inevitable, quite unlike Hegel: a person could remain in a subordinate position to a particular stage or lingering on the cusp, unable to complete the transcendental leap of the will. Yet, the significance of the movement through the stages was not underplayed either, each stage bearing major personal differences from other stages while, at the same time, containing a strong relationship with them.

The nature of this manoeuvre required a significant *leap* in order to make the transcendence to another stage. Described in his notebooks of 1835, the *leap* that marked the movement from the purely human sphere to the religious sphere of Christianity, which he called the "despairing leap", proved to be decisive in his whole developmental theory.⁶⁵ This he worked out even before he entered upon his authorship. Along with this major leap, Kierkegaard had to refine his theory with similar but less significant leaps in the step by step mental and spiritual development of the authentic person (one who undertakes the development towards a militant existential Christianity). Because he made a sharp distinction between the mental and existential spheres, Kierkegaard outlined two kinds of leap: the *dialectical leap* for the mental sphere, and the *despairing leap* for the spiritual, existential sphere. There is a reflection of one in the other but each has its own motivating factors needed to accomplish the leap according to its own sphere. As one moves from one sphere to another, significant leaps are set in train. Transitions between the spheres are always taking place. But Kierkegaard specifically concentrated on the transition from *mental possibility* to *existential actuality*. Here, the leap necessary to obtain transcendence was intuitive, in the sense that no logic could necessitate such a transcendental leap. Only upon making such an intuitive leap could the conclusion be justified. That signifies the proximity between the dialectic of mental states and the despairing leap of spiritual existential actuality.

⁶⁵ Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 133.

An important concept for Kierkegaard is what he called “repetition”, the English-translation for the Danish word “gentagelse” without an exact equivalent in German or in English.⁶⁶ Kierkegaard used it to replace the Hegelian word translated in English as “mediation”. The pseudonymous author, the aesthete Constantine Constantius (“he who was most constant”) wrote:

What would life be without repetition? Who would want to be a tablet on which life wrote something new every moment, or memorial to something past? Who would want to be moved by the fleeting, the new, that is always effeminately diverting the soul? If God himself had not willed repetition, there would never have been a world. He would either have followed the easy plans of hope, or recalled everything and preserved it in recollection. He did not do this. This is the reason there is a world. The world consists of repetition. Repetition is actuality and the earnestness of existence. He who wills repetition is genuinely mature.⁶⁷

Repetition works out in both a latitudinal and longitudinal sense. In the latitudinal sense, repetition stands for those constantly required moments when something has to be re-affirmed in order to maintain that quality. The re-affirmation of one’s faith, for example, in which faith requires renewal or it lapses. Reaching a particular stage is not a one-off event. Constancy entails repetition of the decision again and again. But Repetition also speaks of the varied status of repetition according to the nature of the stage in which it occurs. Aesthetic repetition does not return the initial value once experienced by the Aesthete. Constantine Constantius writes:

After several days’ repetition of this [going again and again to the theatre], I became bitter, so tired of repetition that I decided to return home. I made no great discovery, yet it was strange, because I had discovered that there was no such thing as repetition. I became aware of this by having it repeated in every possible way.⁶⁸

This contradiction made by Constantine was clearly what Kierkegaard intended. Contradiction makes itself most apparent in the Aesthetic stage.

⁶⁶ William McDonald. (2012) “Søren Kierkegaard”: n. p.

⁶⁷ Søren Kierkegaard. (2009) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*: 4.

⁶⁸ Søren Kierkegaard. (2009) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*: 38.

Repetition here simply leads to ennui and disappointment. Constantine Constantius will never be quite able to transcend his aestheticism, even though he witnesses the “young man” achieve the ethical age. However, the repetition in both the ethical and religious stages becomes a necessary mainstay in supporting the constancy of the stage itself. The young man writes to Constantine:

Is repetition not possible? Have I not received everything back, only doubled? Have I not myself again, and in such a way that I have double appreciation of what this means? And what is a repetition of worldly goods, which have no meaning in relation to spiritual matters, compared to such a repetition?⁶⁹

Ethical repetition leads to a deeper relation with the spiritual sphere in the religious stage.⁷⁰ The young man also writes:

I am back to my old self. This ‘self’, which another would not pick up off the street, is mine again. The schism in my being has been removed. I am whole again. The anxieties of sympathy, which my pride nourished and supported, no longer force splits and separations.⁷¹

Judge William also noted in his validation of marriage, in opposition to the aesthetic conception of “love” that took its central value from what was presented *first* and thus not subsequently repeatable in time:

But healthy love has quite a different worth; it works itself out in time, and is therefore also capable of rejuvenating itself through these outward signs; and – what for me is the main point – it has quite another idea of time and meaning of repetition.⁷²

The longitudinal sense of repetition is underlined by the latitudinal. The same aspects of life are repeated from stage to stage, but they assume a different, deeper significance the further one travels along Kierkegaard’s dialectical path. In the *Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus states that a “human being is spirit.”⁷³ That is, he goes on, the self “is a relation which relates

⁶⁹ Søren Kierkegaard. (2009) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*: 74-5.

⁷⁰ Nythamar Fernandes de Oliveira,. (2001) “Dialect and Existence in Kierkegaard and Kant”: 245

⁷¹ Søren Kierkegaard. (2009) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*: 74.

⁷² Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 465.

⁷³ Søren Kierkegaard. (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 13.

itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but the relation's relating itself to itself." The self is liable to despair unless it acknowledges its immediate relation to God: "[I]n relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."⁷⁴ There is thus a constant and necessary repetition of faith: "Faith," said Johannes de silentio, the author of *Fear and Trembling*, "is just this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal [of the ethical stage], though in such a way, be it noted, that the movement is repeated, that is, that, having been in the universal, the single individual now sets himself apart as the particular above the universal."⁷⁵ The self, in other words, is the repetition of faith.⁷⁶

Whilst Hegel equated the inner with the outer, Kierkegaard, on the contrary, discerned a difference between the inner and outer, which imparts directionality to the life of the person in relation to that which lies beyond. It is clear that a new alignment of the disciplines, especially of aesthetics and ethics, was accomplished for Kierkegaard by granting a greater role to the subject.⁷⁷ It is particularly so in his understanding of ethics as superseding the aesthetic view precisely because it emphasizes the subject. While subjective judgement is called for in aesthetics, it has little to do with life choices as is essential for the ethical self. She or he who lives purely in an aesthetic way, by gaining experiences of delight and pleasure, rather similar to a hedonist, without cognisance of the being of another, neither sympathetically nor empathetically, that is without rendering honour to both the being of the self or of the other, can hardly be said to live ethically.

Kierkegaard arrived at his "stages on life's way" that, as we have seen, forms the core of his authorship and philosophy through a synthesis of a double process, one that employed a dogmatic (i.e. specifically Christian) view, and the other, a phenomenological view. The first developed from the contrast between Augustinian theology, in which the doctrine of Original Sin

⁷⁴ Søren Kierkegaard. (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 14.

⁷⁵ Søren Kierkegaard. (1985) *Fear and Trembling*: 84.

⁷⁶ William McDonald. (2012) "Søren Kierkegaard": n. p.

⁷⁷ Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 143.

was expounded in a theodicy apportioning blame to humankind (especially women; Kierkegaard would always have an ambivalent relation with women) resulting, therefore, in the desolation of the human soul, and the optimistic understanding of human moral worth in the theology of Pelagius, whom Kierkegaard unfairly identified with Hegel as him who, he thought, made Christianity fit into the world.⁷⁸ Kierkegaard wrote in his journal:

There is a contrast of primary significance between Augustine and Pelagius. The former crushes everything in order to rebuild it again. The former crushes everything in order to rebuild it again. The other addresses himself to man as he is. The first system, therefore, in respect to Christianity, falls into three stages: creation – the fall and a consequent condition of death and impotence; a new creation – whereby man is placed in apposition where he can choose; and then, if he chooses – Christianity. – The other system addresses itself to man as he is (Christianity fits into the world).⁷⁹

Augustine had three positions of human relation to Christianity: 1/ Innocence (*posse non peccare*); 2/ Slavery to sin (*non posse non peccare*), and 3/ Redemption through Christianity (*non posse peccare*). Thus in Augustine, Kierkegaard found the basis for his stages. However, Augustine's abstract outline needed to be related to actuality as experienced by humanity. This is where the phenomenological view became critical for Kierkegaard.

The phenomenological point of view began with Kierkegaard turning his attention to the age levels in human development, which he considered to be four: 1/ The child is not separated from its environment; 2/ Idyllic well-being in peace with the family; 3/ The romantic stage, and 4/ Christianity.⁸⁰ Next, it is clear that he compared his four stage model with Hegel's which had only three: Immediacy, reflection and unity. While he first identifies Hegel's first stage, immediacy, with an abstract "nothing", it is clear that the dogmatic view of Augustine provides Kierkegaard with the means of bringing Hegel's 3 stages into co-ordination with his conception

⁷⁸ If Hegel stood aside from the world while, at the same time maintaining his system was the way in which nature unfolded, his the system itself must be a dialectic of transcendence with immanence. Kierkegaard's identification of Pelagius with Hegel on the world-immanence of Christianity can't be correct. See Hegel, G. W. F. (1895) *The Philosophy of Religion Vol. 1*: 46; *Vol. 2*: 347-8.

⁷⁹ q. in Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 144.

⁸⁰ Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 147-8.

of life's phenomenal stages to produce his tripartite schema: 1. The aesthetic stage; 2. The ethical stage, and 3. The religious stage. Although he considered Hegel did not reach the ethical stage, remaining in the aesthetic stage, nevertheless, I believe that Hegel's schema was more than suggestive in the construction of Kierkegaard's stages, now separated from the lifespan as necessary developmental stages, and given an existential significance of choice and insight.

While the dialectical method was intensely significant in the philosophy of both Hegel and Kierkegaard, nevertheless, Kierkegaard consistently disputed Hegel's *system* at the same time arguing for unity in his authorship. The motivations of the two philosophers were quite different, and therein lies the distinction between them. Hegel aimed at obtaining finality in the unity of all being, through the unfolding of the Idea and its whole content. Actuality necessarily lay in the method since it claimed to reflect the thought unfolding in actuality. Hegel aimed for a "system of existence".⁸¹ Therein we find the seeds of Hegel's necessity in that the Idea serves to realise each stage, without human prevarication interrupting its noble unfolding.

For Kierkegaard, the method remained an instrument whose conclusions needed to be related to actuality because it did not produce actuality as such. Malantschuk argued: "Kierkegaard's dialectic is concerned only with the possibilities of actuality; actuality itself cannot come in another way, for example, through the individual's conversion of possibility into actuality through his own action."⁸² Choice remains at the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy; the stages do not unfold under a process of necessity. Quite to the contrary, the stages are invoked by the person as a conversion of her or his choosing. Unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard does not establish a "system of existence" but indicates ascending stages of contrasting existential *possibility* within personal existence.⁸³

The stages as conceived by Kierkegaard are as follows, beginning with a "stage" that is not recognised as such:

⁸¹ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 99.

⁸² Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 170.

⁸³ Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard's Thought*: 172.

The existence of the *philistine* is barely a stage at all but, nevertheless, Kierkegaard is extremely critical of despairing philistines as those who “mortgage themselves to the world.”⁸⁴ They have many characteristics of the Aesthete, but without her or his educated and refined perception. Instead, they are identical to T. S. Eliot’s “Hollow Men”,⁸⁵ without recourse to any inwardness, to which they are “blind”. “The philistine-bourgeois mentality,” wrote Anti-Climacus, “reassures itself with the trite and obvious and is as much in despair whether things go well or badly.”⁸⁶ Whereas the Fatalist and Determinist lack possibility through their inability to mitigate necessity, the philistine believes he is master of possibility by tricking it into the “trap or madhouse of probability” but, with such hubris, does not realise that he has fallen under the spiritless thrall “*and is most wretched of all*,”⁸⁷ Kierkegaard’s most deafening condemnation. Johannes Climacus wrote in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: “Philistinism always consists in the use of the relative as the absolute in connection with the essential.”⁸⁸ The Philistine thinks that they can make decisions but this is a delusion. In reality, the decisive factor is circumstance and its anonymous forces.⁸⁹ Certainly this lies behind Judge William’s complaint about those within conventional bourgeois society:

And this is the pitiful thing to one who contemplates human life, that so many live on in a quiet state of perdition; they outlive themselves, not in the sense that the content of life is successfully unfolding and now is possessed in this expanded state, but they live their lives, as it were, outside of themselves, they vanish like shadows, their immortal soul blown away, and they are not alarmed by the problem of immortality, for they are already in a state of dissolution before they die. They do not live aesthetically, but neither has the ethical manifested itself in its entirety, so they have not exactly rejected it either; they therefore are not sinning, except insofar as it is a sin not to be one thing or the other [...]⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Søren Kierkegaard. (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 150.

⁸⁵ T. S. Eliot. (1963) *Collected Poems 1909-1962*: 89-92.

⁸⁶ Søren Kierkegaard. (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 41.

⁸⁷ Søren Kierkegaard. (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 42.

⁸⁸ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 486.

⁸⁹ Johannes Sløk. (1994) *Kierkegaard's Universe*: 47.

⁹⁰ Robert Bretall (1946) *A Kierkegaard Anthology*: 107. This contains the quote that was edited from the Hannay translation.

Still the philistine is hardly even a type of proto-Aesthete but a state of avoidance, of deferral, and Kierkegaard does not give it the significance of being a stage of existence at all. Yet there are moments when the absurdity of life's situation strikes into the emptiness that is the philistine. This is one of Kierkegaard's important existential moments; an opportunity to decide on seeking another sphere of existence. Such moments are considered by Kierkegaard in relation with irony, with comedy, with anxiety, with despair. Each of these moments presents to the person a true picture of their existence and breaks open the way to another mode of being.

At the moment of conscious despair when the philistine recognises, in a sense *chooses*, her or his despair,⁹¹ the self is validated for the first time; the self made transparent to itself. But with it appears the knowledge that the self is also bound to its finitude within the aesthetic. Here we encounter what Gregory Bateson *et al* later called a Double Bind.⁹² That the double bind is implicit in despair is certainly posited by Judge William's reference in *Either/Or* (quoting the aesthete "A"):

You become totally intoxicated in what you yourself called the higher lunacy. "In it contained all life's wisdom, but never has anyone expounded it so pithily – as if a god in the guise of a bogle were talking to suffering humanity – as a great thinker and philosopher of life, who said to a man who had tossed his hat onto the floor, "If you pick it up, you'll get a beating; if you don't pick it up, you'll also get a beating, now you can choose!"⁹³

The double bind is particularly present in the series of aphorisms of the chapter "Diapsalmata" that opens *Either/Or*, for example:

I can't be bothered. I can't be bothered to ride, the motion is too violent; I can't be bothered to walk, it's too strenuous; I can't be bothered to lie down, for either I'd

⁹¹ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: ?

⁹² The Double Bind was formulated by Gregory Bateson *et al* to describe the causes of schizophrenia. (Bateson, Gregory. (1973) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*: 173-198.) As far as I know Anthony Wilden was the first to apply the Double Bind to the abstract fact of being a conscious self. (See Wilden, Anthony. (1980) *System and Structure*: 110-124.)

⁹³ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 478.

stay lying down and that i can't be bothered with, or I'd have to get up again, and I can't be bothered with that either. In short I just can't be bothered.⁹⁴

Within that chapter is a paper titled "Either/Or: An ecstatic lecture" which begins with the lines, a classic double bind:

If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it; if you marry or if you do not marry, you will regret both; whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret both.⁹⁵

The aesthetic stage is always marked by this knowledge. Constantine Constantius makes it clear in *Repetition*, that although he is an aesthete, nevertheless he recognises the possibility of the ethical stage achieved by the Young Man. But it is a possibility that is viewed from the outset as an abstract choice of equal value to every other external possibility. Yet the knowledge of the self, albeit an abstract knowledge, is what discriminates the aesthete from the philistine. The choice for the aesthete is always a *mere* repetition of this "either-or" where one's choices are of equal value within the sphere of appearances.⁹⁶ Thus the underlying despair in aestheticism is acknowledged by "A" without his full cognisance of its ontological significance.

What makes despair a double bind is first its arising in the emptiness of the aesthetic; at this point one may not have recognised its implicit meaninglessness, the absolute expression of emptiness.⁹⁷ However, when one is thrown back upon oneself to answer this emptiness, by knowing it as an emptiness of one's own soul, then one is already within the double bind, for one cannot escape from oneself without losing oneself. Pursuing an answer in the externalities of the aesthetic cannot relieve the despair. Nor will one find it purely within oneself. There is an injunction about engaging the solution in the aesthetic self; there is also an injunction against escaping from this position. Burying oneself in work or pleasure merely serves to delay the inevitable. The first act is to *choose your despair* for the very reason that it validates the self,

⁹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 43.

⁹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 54.

⁹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 478-9.

⁹⁷ Paul Tillich (1963). *The Courage to Be*: 48-63. Tillich identifies three pairs of anxieties where the first term derives from the *relative* condition (e.g. "fate"; "emptiness", and "guilt") and the second represents its *absolute* expression (e.g. "death"; "meaningless", and "condemnation" respectively).

albeit in the negative sense of finitude. One becomes transparent to oneself: I realize that I am a sinner, in the conventional Christian sense. And I learn to be who I am; not lose myself by attempting to be what I am not. Unlike the philistine, whose immanence to the business of the social and economic environment dissipates all sense of self, the aesthete actively detaches her or himself from the social environment.⁹⁸

While the forms in which aestheticism takes are legion, the ethicist in Kierkegaard tends to the singular. The ethical stage focuses upon the one voice, that of Judge William in both *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*. His ethical style seems so ordinary; somewhat pompously conventional: "To tell you the truth," writes Johannes Sløk, "this Vilhelm [William], in a very irking manner, resembles a philistine. But he is not. He's an ethicist."⁹⁹ A Judge represents a profession which passes its legal and moral judgements upon real-world situations, practically and in relation to a set of legal and moral formulae that both inform and provide the framework for judgement, rather than in the abstract, which, as Hegel so rightly pointed out, is a negation of real-life intuition.¹⁰⁰ Judge William also represents a *judge penitent*. Through this pseudonym, Kierkegaard is able to discuss the "real-life" situations of the manifold characters in *Either/Or I*, of whom Judge William can identify as all aesthetes. As a result, Kierkegaard indirectly addresses those readers who saw something of themselves in these aesthetes. We are all made to account for ourselves in the choice offered to us by the Judge:

Either, then, one is to life aesthetically or one is to live ethically. In this, as I have said, there is no question yet of a choice in a stricter sense; for someone who lives aesthetically does not choose, and someone who, once the ethical has become apparent to him, chooses the aesthetic, does not live in the aesthetic sphere for he sins and comes under the category of the ethical, even if his life must be described as *unethical*.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Julia Watkin. (1997) *Kierkegaard*: 58.

⁹⁹ Johannes Sløk. (1994) *Kierkegaard's Universe*: 57.

¹⁰⁰ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 13.

¹⁰¹ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 486.

The ethical stage marks the advent of the Eternal in the life of a person, rather than pertaining to the immanent Temporal in aesthetic immediacy. Judge William wrote: “I choose the absolute, and what is the absolute? It is myself in my eternal validity.”¹⁰² Kierkegaard would continue to advocate a type of dualism of that which formed the basis of earthly existence and that which stood for the divine. Earthly existence called for divine being to properly define it. The temporal calls forth eternity; finitude calls forth infinity, and necessity called forth possibility. Needless to say the reverse is also true in Kierkegaard’s universe. Seeing into the emptiness of living as a philistine made room for choosing to be an aesthete. Seeing the underlying despair of the aesthete made room for the choice to become ethical. Comprehending the temporal, the finite, the necessary, called forth the eternal, the infinite, the possible; it makes room for choosing oneself in relation to that otherness, the divine sphere in which rested eternity, infinity, possibility.

The way into the ethical stage lies in Judge William’s major tenet to “choose yourself” as yourself,¹⁰³ a transcendental choice; not the abstract choice of the “mere either/or”. The person of the decider is of vital importance:

For someone with the right attitude [..., he] chooses himself, not in a finite sense, for then this ‘self’ would be something finite along with other finite things, but in an absolute sense. And still he chooses himself and not another. This self he thus chooses is infinitely concrete, for it is himself, and yet it is absolutely different from his former self, for he has chosen it absolutely. This self did not exist previously, for it came into existence through the choice, and yet it has been in existence, for it was indeed ‘he himself’.¹⁰⁴

The choice, Judge William writes in *Either/Or*, accomplishes the “two dialectical movements”; the synthesis of becoming the self, and the self already in existence from which the choice is made: “[W]hat is chosen does not exist and comes into existence through the choice,

¹⁰² Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 516.

¹⁰³ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 513.

¹⁰⁴ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 517.

and what is chosen exists, otherwise it would not be a choice.”¹⁰⁵ If that which was chosen had not existed, then it would have been an act of creativity. “But,” wrote Judge William, “I do not create myself, I choose myself.” As a “free spirit”, the self is born of the principle of contradiction;¹⁰⁶ that is, the dialectical moment is a moment of choosing the self both in its “new being”, as Paul Tillich would express it,¹⁰⁷ and as it is, already in existence. And when he seems to be becoming more isolated, he is becoming nearer to the personal depths which connect him ever more closely to the whole.¹⁰⁸

The advent of the religious element in the ethical, inescapable given Kierkegaard’s Christian purpose, in Judge William’s ethical stage suggests that the religious stage is being *phased in* as the person progresses through the ethical stage. At the earliest phase of the ethical, the person still believes in her or his ability to completely meet the requirements raised by the Eternal. However, the increasing religious dimension reveals just how little has been achieved as a consequence of a person’s own efforts. The centre of the ethical, therefore, shifts from the narrow concerns of the self towards the religious centre of God.¹⁰⁹ Johannes Climacus wrote, clearly of the opening movement in the ethical stage: “The Socratic view is that each individual is his own centre and the world is centred around him, because his self knowledge is knowledge of God.”¹¹⁰ Knowledge of the Eternal, which was perhaps a mere abstract knowledge, has now become deeply personal. The Eternal permeates all personal relationships, especially, for Judge William, marriage.¹¹¹ From the *Stages on Life’s Way*, one sees how the ethical stage of Judge William is but a transition to the religious stage that fills half the book with the work “Guilty/Not Guilty”. It is far more apparent there than in *Either/Or* where the religious stage is but a postscript.

¹⁰⁵ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 517.

¹⁰⁶ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 518.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Tillich. (1967) *The Boundaries of Our Being: A Collection of his Sermons, The Eternal Now & The New Being with his Autobiographical Sketch On the Boundary*: 162 ff.

¹⁰⁸ Søren Kierkegaard. (1992) *Either/Or*: 518.

¹⁰⁹ Gregor Malantschuk. (1987) *Kierkegaard’s Way to the Truth*: 40.

¹¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard. (2009) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*: 90.

¹¹¹ Gregor Malantschuk. (1987) *Kierkegaard’s Way to the Truth*: 44-5.

While the person continues to believe in his own capacity to accomplish the good and overlooks the strength of the bond with the temporal, the person persists in the ethical stage. However, facing this incapacity, the person comes to the threshold with the religious stage. When the person comes to realise she or he is grounded in evil through the revelation of Christianity, she or he becomes ready for a “radical cure” on entering the religious stage. Immediately, one can see the Augustinian bent of Kierkegaard. Entering the stage is, however, not a logical necessity. As with the previous stages, one must choose.

The three part progress of aesthetic-ethical-religious stages does not adequately cover Kierkegaard’s dialectical framework. Either/Or can be said to divide between the aesthetic of Volume 1 and the ethical of Volume 2, Julia Watkin asks what we are to make of the final sermon of Judge William which speaks openly of the religious¹¹² Moreover, the ethical is combined with the religious stage in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* into an ethico-religious stage, as for example when the “author”, Johannes Climacus, comments on *Either/Or*:

It struck me as significant that Either/Or ends precisely in the edifying truth (but without so much as italicizing the words, much less dogmatizingly). I could have wished to see this principle more definitely emphasized, in order that the individual stages on the way toward a Christian religious existence might clearly be set out.¹¹³

The religious stage was divided into two: Religion A, and Religion B. The first entails the realisation of the bondage to the temporal realm and the incapacity to deal with the ethical question alone; therefore, willing to enter into relation with all that lives in the temporal realm through God, and it, therefore, represents an extension of the ethical stage as such. Although becoming conscious of the self’s nothingness in the face of God, the ethical nevertheless has not been set aside because there is still hope in the goodness of the self. According to Gregor Malantschuk, Religion A is a relation with Christ “only as a prototype—not as Savior,”¹¹⁴ the

¹¹² Julia Watkin. (1997) *Kierkegaard*: 54.

¹¹³ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 229.

¹¹⁴ Gregor Malantschuk. (1987) *Kierkegaard’s Way to the Truth*: 56.

latter being characteristic of Religion B. Climacus describes Religion A emerging from the ethical through what might be thought religious emotions, expressing religious pathos:

Now action might seem to be the precise opposite of suffering and in so far it may seem strange to say that the essential expression for existential pathos, which is the pathos of action, should be suffering. However, this is only apparently the case, and it becomes evident here again, as the constant criterion of the religious sphere, that the positive is the index of the negative (in contradistinction to the simple directness of the immediate, and the relative directness of the reflective): the distinguishing mark of religious action is suffering.¹¹⁵

The religious life consists in a difficult understanding of one's finitude and dependency but, as C. Stephen Evans says, "the achievement of this recognition in a "pathos" (something we would probably today call an emotion) is nevertheless an active achievement."¹¹⁶ This is a religion of immanence, set well within the existence of the person and not especially Christian as such.¹¹⁷ It derives directly from natural concepts and emotions possible for every human being from the wealth and depth of human experience and reason.¹¹⁸

Religion B, which Climacus calls the "paradoxical religiousness",¹¹⁹ on the other hand, is considered to be a religion of transcendence – that is, Christianity – a revealed religion not dependent upon human experience or reason:

The paradoxical religiousness breaks with immanence and makes the fact existing in the absolute contradiction, not within immanence, but against immanence. There is no longer any fundamental kinship between the temporal and the eternal, because the eternal itself has entered time and would constitute there the kinship.¹²⁰

Religion A can also be said to be "dialectical" in the sense that the person's relation with the Eternal and its eternal happiness through the dialectic of inward appropriation, determines the

¹¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 387.

¹¹⁶ C. Stephen Evans. (2009) *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*: 130.

¹¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 498.

¹¹⁸ C. Stephen Evans. (2009) *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*: 139.

¹¹⁹ E.g., Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 505.

¹²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 508-9.

extent to which existence accords with this relation, expressing it accordingly in personal transformation.¹²¹ That is, Religion A focuses on the dialectic of inward transformation. However, Religion B goes much further than this, by determining the very ground of the Eternal and eternal happiness, not just a deeper dialectic understanding of inwardness but actually defining the very nature of eternal happiness itself, “not as a task of thought, as Climacus says, but paradoxically as a repellent to produce new pathos.”¹²² Religion B’s predilection for the existential qualification far exceeds the intellectual challenge of Religion A. Yet, Climacus claims that a necessary condition for Religion B is, first and foremost, the presence of Religion A, that which makes room for the possibility of Religion B. Whereas, Religion A can exist as a possibility within the framework of any religious order, pagan or Christian, Climacus argues that only in a decisive, militant Christianity can fulfil the establishment of Religion B.¹²³

This final stage of Kierkegaardian dialectic is neither the easiest nor the necessary stage to accomplish, once one has followed the dialectical process to its conclusion as in Hegel, although Hegel’s distinction between the *Natural Religions* and the revelatory *Absolute Religion* of Christianity¹²⁴ seems to suggest otherwise. On the contrary, as Johannes Climacus says in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the religion A is already laborious enough. But Climacus’s task is to make becoming Christian in the Religious B sense exceptionally difficult: Whether for “stupid people” or “clever pates”, it is a religion that is qualitatively and essentially difficult for everyone equally for its relinquishing of understanding and thought, and keeping the soul fixed upon the absurd.¹²⁵ This implies an inversion of Hegel’s dialectic as Kierkegaard’s stages move “deeper” they become increasingly difficult.¹²⁶ Furthermore, whereas Kierkegaard thought Hegel’s Absolute was intended to encompass the world *as it is* as a whole, Kierkegaard’s final absolute Religion B forsook the world. But as Hegel’s “Absolute Religion” also forsook the

¹²¹ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 508-9.

¹²² Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 494.

¹²³ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 495.

¹²⁴ Georg W. F. Hegel (1895) *The Philosophy of Religion*.

¹²⁵ Søren Kierkegaard. (1941) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 495.

¹²⁶ Gregor Malantschuk. (1971) *Kierkegaard’s Thought*: 170-4.

world, there were greater similarities with Hegel than Kierkegaard suspected. Forsaking the world also stands in opposition to the natural theology of those like William Paley who held to the teleological argument from design¹²⁷ or, following from John Ray, believed in the divine wisdom of God in the creation.¹²⁸ Kierkegaard's dialectic manifested his negative theology in which the Hegelian *negative* when understood solely as an "antithesis" was converted into the existential *leit motif* of an Augustinian discourse on sin and despair. In dealing with a theology of despair, Kierkegaard's work was inspired. However, it tends to ignore the very central notion in Christianity of *forgiveness*.¹²⁹ Paul Tillich wrote:

There is no condition to forgiveness. But forgiveness could not come to us if we were not asking for it and receiving it. Forgiveness is an answer to the question implied in our existence. An answer is answer only for him who has asked, who is aware of the question. This awareness cannot be fabricated. It may be in a hidden place in our souls, covered by many strata of righteousness. It may reach our consciousness in certain moments. Or day by day, it may fill our conscious life as well as its unconscious depths and drive us to the question to which forgiveness is the answer.¹³⁰

We shall have recourse to Kierkegaard's dialectical stages particularly in the discussion on Francis Webb's poetry, except for the Thomasine tendency of Webb to favour natural theology in relation to the landscape and to favour a positive theology of forgiveness.

The dialectic as method and theory

A variation of Kierkegaard's dialectic serves to bring a theoretical harmony to the varied notes employed in this thesis. Some discord is inevitable. My dialectical themes are different from Kierkegaard's, retaining a formalistic mode more in keeping with Hegel than the (mostly) triple stages of Kierkegaard's aesthetic-ethical-religious project. In this sense, something of the developmental feel of Hegel is obtained while maintaining the freedom of possibility infusing

¹²⁷ William Paley (1825) *The Works of William Paley: Vol. 5 Natural Theology*: 27-29.

¹²⁸ Basil Willey. (1962) *The Eighteenth-Century Background*: 39ff.

¹²⁹ Except insofar as the *Works of Love* reverses this tendency. See Bretall, Robert. (1946) *A Kierkegaard Anthology*: 318 ff.

¹³⁰ Paul Tillich. (1967) *The Boundaries of Our Being: A Collection of his Sermons, The Eternal Now & The New Being with his Autobiographical Sketch On the Boundary*: 158.

Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, which does not reflect the heavy dependence of Hegel's necessity from a supposed developmental mimesis of actuality. If the reader remains solely within, say, the signification hermeneutics (of poetic incompleteness), in which we continue to assign new meaning to the poem, a rich vein of knowledge will, nevertheless, accrue to the reader. While this bears some resemblance to Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, the identity with that stage is rendered incommensurate simply because the repetition in reading the poem demands a long-term studiousness which the Aesthete would consider too tedious, given the low threshold of boredom typical of the Aesthete. Repetition, as Constantine Constantius discovered, did not allow the Aesthete to renew the values initially derived from a situation or bring new values to bear, merely disappointment that the first values were not repeated. Reading poetry at this "incompleteness" stage is not without ethical or ontological value to the person, even should those values be imparted intrinsically or unconsciously. The young poet in Kierkegaard's *Repetition* dwells on either side of the line with the ethical, a point that Constantine Constantius concedes although he himself cannot follow the poet across this threshold. To read for a pure signification does not necessarily entail a shallow reading, nor does it totally ignore the ontological being of the reader, of the poet or of that towards which the poem points. Much of one's reading of a poem returns one to the discourses of being which inform one's identity, although no open acknowledgement need be made in consequence. In a Freudian reading of a poem, the specific discourses of being a self are brought into that reading. I will not be undertaking a critique of the Freudian paradigm because it lies outside the purview of this thesis. However, it does provide a clear example of discourses of being introduced into, and dominating, one's reading.

While the dialectical method passes from one "stage" to another, the whole might be inextricably intertwined in any single reading of a poem. That suggests the possibility that reading a poem might foreground a particular "stage", it is more than likely the other "stages" will be present perhaps manifest as a background. It is unlikely that any "stage" exists in isolation. For this reason, that which constitutes the *poetic spirit* is encompassed by the whole

dialectic, as Hegel was first to recognise. This is emphasised in the *Conclusion*, which attempts a description of the *poetic spirit* by using the descriptions of “spirit” by Paul Tillich, by John Macquarrie and by Claude Bruaire as a means of achieving an aggregating condensate of the whole. In similar vein, the methodology does not reflect the condition of the poetic experience as it evolves in actuality, but represents one way in which poetic experience is rendered by a critical discourse. This, in itself, indicates that the overall program of this thesis cannot deliver a complete portrait of the poetic experience owing to the very same reasoning that a complete set of interpretations of a poem is not possible, as will be made clear by similar reasoning to that used by Kurt Gödel for his Incompleteness Theorem in *Theory Chapter One*.

The breadth of the Hegelian *negative*, as outlined in the section devoted to Hegel’s dialectic, a concept that is surprisingly much more varied than any post-Kierkegaardian version of the over-simplistic *antithesis*, does not always render a collapse of the previous “stage” as a *negation* in its most destructive sense. This has been the greatest surprise to be gained from reading the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Consequently, this tells us that the Hegelian dialectic is no mono-lineal project in the form to which Kierkegaard opposes his multi-dimensional existential dialectic. Rather, the Hegelian dialectic is in actuality capable of a multi-dimensional organic discourse far more inclusive of experience than has been supposed. Where this misunderstanding of Hegel’s negative as solely an antithesis came from I have not been able to discover, but it has been responsible for a very narrow interpretation of the Hegelian project and, I believe, a consequential devaluing of Hegel’s significance in general works on the history of philosophy.¹³¹ The notion of the Hegelian negative, as being broader than a mere antithesis, creates the possibility for reinvigorating the Hegelian dialectic itself. The negative need not be conceived as a negation. When one concludes that a stage is the negative for the next stage, it does not necessarily follow it has been negated by the latter stage. On the contrary, it can form an armature around which the new stage will be constructed. The armature is still a *negative*, but it

¹³¹ For example: Bertrand Russell. (1961) *History of Western Philosophy*: 703.

has not collapsed into its negation. Yet transcendence is in process by which the mould or armature is grasped in its entirety but extended by the latter stage in terms beyond those informing the former stage. The move from poetic incompleteness of the first theory chapter to the poetic mystery of the second is a recognition of the ontological consequences of poetic incompleteness, which does not, however, *negate* poetic incompleteness although poetic incompleteness might be interpreted as the *negative for* poetic mystery.

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard was certainly correct in identifying the *necessity* that drove the Hegelian dialectic to the Absolute. By advocating the personal *choice* that was needed for crossing the threshold of any stage, he returned his stages of the dialectic to the existential realm rather than locked into a formal necessity, sometimes through the negation or exhaustion of a prior state. The Aesthete “A” in *Either/Or* seems already to have existed in a state of exhaustion of the aesthetic stage, can recognise the ethical stage, yet is still incapable of making the choice of the existential *either/or* rather than the mere aesthetic *either/or*. What motivates the transcendence of a stage in this thesis is very much connected to the Kierkegaardian choice, that is not merely an act of will alone but requires the leap of faith that can only come to one, not only in the face of doubt, but as an act of grace: a dialogue with the world in which both self and world act. This might be constituted by the dialogical moment that I denote by “creative vocation” in which a *calling-forth* is accomplished in the *one call* of self *with* world (I placed this section on the poet’s creative vocation into the *Theory Chapter Five*: “On Relation”.) Whereas a leap is made, it is a leap that is enabled by the person in relation with the world. In this way, much of the poetic spirit will unfold for us through choosing the distinct steps that reach towards the conclusion and its outline of an ethics of the poetic spirit.

Each step stands for a particular dynamic event. The realisation of a poem’s hermeneutic incompleteness (simply: an incompleteness in its possible interpretations) will as likely occur after a assigning a number, possibly many, interpretations to the poem. Should experience be taken in the direction according to this dialectical process, there are already hints of a dynamic development within the “stage”. At other times, a step might be taken such that a “stage”

emerges fully-formed or, as often, complete within the (unconscious) background serving the reader's relationship with the poem. Although a particular dynamic event is foregrounded, nevertheless they are not separated from each other. The whole complex of inter-relational events and existences, of which the reader has perhaps only a partial inkling, therefore, can be excavated from the intertwining intricacy by the dialectical method. For this reason, we cannot expect the Case Study chapters to reflect the dialectical "stages" as articulated in the preceding Theory Chapters except where an attempt has been made to locate that theory in the poetry.

The event is both *different from* the leap that brings it into being and *identical with* that leap. In short, the dialectic between originary movement and first enunciated "stage" is a *bringing-into-being* and *being that is an event as a happening*. Recognition and acceptance of the being and the being of the happening are the same. Thus the leap that necessarily accompanies the coming into existence of the happening *is* the happening. Sartre in a very different context wrote:

Genuine spontaneity must be perfectly clear: it *is* what it produces and can be nothing else. If it were tied synthetically to something other than itself, it would in fact embrace some obscurity, and even a certain passivity, in the transformation. Indeed it would be necessary to admit a passage from *itself* to *something else*, which would presuppose that spontaneity escapes from itself.¹³²

The leap, therefore, is the spontaneous first movement of the "stage" itself, thereafter developing according to the frame already in place by the leap of this first movement. That, of course, does not preclude in the prior "stage" a sense of *intimation* of impending change, the forgotten stage in Graham Wallas's "stages of control", that might make itself apparent in a feeling, bodily sensation or even in a partly formed concept,¹³³ framed in terms of the earlier stage but already reaching towards the new stage. The dialectical approach to be adopted requires the transcendental leap of a creative moment that, itself escapes the dialectic yet manifests the driving force of that dialectic. Thus our dialectic also belongs *within* a richer realm of personal

¹³² Jean-Paul Sartre (1957) *The Transcendence of the Ego*: 79-80.

¹³³ Graham Wallas (1946) *The Art of Thought*: 55-9.

and communal existence beyond even the dynamic expression of the dialectic. As poetry itself is an expression of this realm – along with all the creative arts and sciences – then it exceeds even the dialectical dynamism that cannot fully encompass it. The tension between the dialectical method, as expounded herein, and the poetic realm serving as the *subject of desire* that drives the dialectical dynamic yet continues to exceed the dialectical art, is itself also dialectical. That the poetic realm exceeds the dialectical method is rather like Robert Browning's oft quoted lines from his poem "Andrea del Sarto": "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?"¹³⁴ It reaches toward its own transcendence.

The opening movement of the thesis discusses a long-recognised truth of poetry, that of its essential hermeneutic indeterminacy. Yet the real birth of the thesis began with the recognition of Gabriel Marcel's concept of mystery in the hermeneutics of poetic metaphor. This, I believe, provides a significant and original response to the philosophical problem of metaphor which has exercised such important thinkers as Max Black, Paul Ricoeur and Donald Davidson, although it would be hubris in the extreme to claim that metaphor has henceforth yielded all of its secrets. The conception of poetic incompleteness, which follows from its basic indeterminacy, originally grew as an abstraction of mystery in order to understand the clear Gödelian logic involved in Marcel's initial formulation of his concept of mystery: *A problem that encroaches upon its own data thereby transcending itself as simple problem*.¹³⁵ Real understanding is not a linear project, as Kierkegaard recognised. It can bounce from one concept to another quite remote from it, yet there is always a deeper connection that we might not be able to articulate. Perhaps it was the case that Marcel, who developed this fundamental philosophy at the time when he was also teaching Paul Ricoeur,¹³⁶ and within two years of Gödel's

¹³⁴ Robert Browning (1981) "Andrea del Sarto" l. 97 in Pettigrew, John ed. (1981) *Robert Browning: The Poems, Volume One*: 646

¹³⁵ Gabriel Marcel (1956) "On the Ontological Mystery": 19.

¹³⁶ I was, therefore, surprised to find neither mention of Marcel nor of mystery in Ricoeur's major work devoted to metaphor: *The Rule of Metaphor*. When in this and in later papers devoted to the question of metaphor, that he seems to be skirting around what is clearly at work in poetic metaphor, is as surprising as it is baffling given the intimate connection between these two great philosophers, Ricoeur and Marcel. I will address Ricoeur's clear avoidance of the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel in a bespoke section in the chapter "On Mystery".

groundbreaking paper, was initially a recognition of the existential dimensions of Gödel's theorem.

Theory Chapter contents

Poetic indeterminacy has long been recognized in the literary critical endeavour. Yet, to my knowledge, its logical condition has not been identified prior to this work. My first theory chapter identifies poetic indeterminacy as hermeneutical *incompleteness*, using similar reasoning to Kurt Gödel's famous Incompleteness Theorem. The incompleteness of poetic interpretation does not follow from the Incompleteness Theorem but its hermeneutics remains incomplete for similar reasons. This stage of our discourse recognizes the paradox that lies in the interpretation of a poetic metaphor, which we take to be a poem *in nuce*. This discussion does not leave the systemic discourses underlying Fregean semantics (born of mathematics) or Saussurean semiotics (born of linguistics). Failing to pass beyond these values leaves us beholden to a never-ending stream of meanings assigned to the poem. But already there is a sense of something deeper towards which poetic incompleteness points. What it points towards is the silent negative that cannot be articulated in the terms pertaining to the stage.

The second theory chapter employs the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel to articulate that which cannot be spoken of in the terms of the previous stage. Poetic incompleteness points towards mystery. Mystery had already been identified in poetry by literary critic Northrop Frye but he was unaware of its existential implications. We understand the negative aspect of mystery as an ever-present problematic. But its positive aspect is an articulation of being which cannot be fully encompassed by critical discourse without appealing to a sense of being in ourselves, thereby disqualifying it as "objective". We understand the mystery of the other through the mystery within ourselves.¹³⁷ Poetry is the lingual medium by which the mystery of the other might be articulated. This stage in our discourse encompasses incompleteness but also calls forth that which incompleteness is unable to describe. It represents a broader and richer discourse

¹³⁷ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 170.

bringing existential and ontological values into a description of poetry. We finish this chapter with a description from Martin Heidegger of the relation with mystery and its ontological importance through his concept of “thinking”.

“Enrichment” is a word used to describe one of the consequences of mystery which returns our attention to the reader. In the negative space between mystery and its hermeneutical incompleteness, enrichment is a dialectical synthesis of the previous discourses. This third theory chapter makes the distinction between “meaning”, pertaining to the stage of incompleteness, and the “meaningful” which locates meaning in relation to the mystery towards which all interpretations point. It, therefore, marks up an intimate connection between the dialectical stages of incompleteness and mystery.

Another intimate connection between the two stages, also a silent negative in their articulation, is the deep personal affirmation that threads through the different interpretations assigned to the poem, by taking a stand both in meaning interpretation and the meaningful location of those meanings in proximity to the mystery. An “affirmation” is defined as an action of involvement and integration of the person in the poem and is distinguished from an “assertion”, which properly belongs to critical discourse. The similarity between an affirmation, used in this poetic sense, and J. L. Austin’s concept of a “performative” is explored, without pushing the similitude too far. An affirmation implies the bearing of witness by the poet with profound consequences for the reader, should this depth of participation be invoked by the reader.

The previous chapters on enrichment and on affirmation were as much a product of the space between the first stages, incompleteness and mystery, as they were a negative within the mould of those stages. Relation, on the other hand, is a third stage, encompassing all that went before but employing a broader, richer articulation. Certainly, mystery pointed to relation but in terms of the discourse articulating mystery, relation was expressed more in that which was not spoken by the chapter on mystery. This stage represents a further dialectical stage in the organic development of the whole. The primary dimensions of relation with the poem are faith – faith in

our interpretations, faith in the mystery – and doubt – doubting our interpretations, etc. Faith, in order to be faith, requires there to be doubt for it to flourish. Martin Buber identified the two dimensions of relation as “distance” and “relation”. Distance sets the other being opposite and relation turns us to face that other. Immediately it becomes clear that *doubt* sets being at a distance and *faith* draws it closer into a relation. The poem, we realize, does not contain the meaning of the other but opens a relation with the other. A poem is essentially dialogical, an articulation of the *between*, like a signpost setting the other at a distance and drawing closer to the other in relation. This notion of the poem as relation enables the many interpretations to all entail the same relation. At the same time, the poem as the relation is completely in keeping with the creative act of writing the poem when that act is defined as a *vocation*, after Martin Heidegger, in which the poet is called forth to call forth the poem.

In ever expanding stages, relation already suggests to some extent the creation of a community. In the primary poetic vocation is a nascent community. However, in community the final dialectical *stage* is reached in which the poem is identified as the *builder* and *maintainer* of a community. We begin to discern the dynamics of this event through a study of the mask in Ancient Greek theatre and a consideration of what is deemed to be a community as opposed to a mere collective. The opposition between the two was made by Martin Buber as a development of the work of Ferdinand de Tönnies. The creative vocation of the poet is raised within the community to what Northrop Frye identified as “kerygma”, a term used with respect to the proclamation of the *Bible*, but applicable to a far wider realm. Community and kerygma represents, respectively, relation and vocation raised onto a social scale. And the poem as “builder” and maintainer of the community is raised to a *myth* on the social scale.

The structure of all the preceding theory chapters creates a mould within which the negative dialectical space emerges in the shape of an ethics of the poetic spirit, silently present within all that has gone before. The conclusion entails this last act in our dialectical drama. The definition of “spirit” is derived mostly from Paul Tillich, John Macquarrie and Claude Bruaire as a description of the spirit that is intrinsic to the poetic experience expounded in the whole of the

theory chapters. A model of the poetic spirit thus ensues and this can be located in the *personal flourishing* that forms the first stage in outlining an ethics of the poetic spirit. “Flourishing” translates the Greek word “eudaimonia” that was central to ancient theories of ethics. The fundamental principle of an ethics of the poetic spirit is the *participation in the flourishing of another*, that which is made possible in the community that has its origin in the poem.

The case study: Francis Webb

Just as Virgil escorted Dante through the bowels of Hell and over the mountain of Purgatory to a vision of Paradise, my helmsman on this voyage will be an Australian poet whose work is currently experiencing a renaissance. He will be my “Virgil” but above all my “Ancient Mariner.” The poet chosen to aid in this exposition is Francis Webb (1925-1973). It would be more accurate, however, to say that Francis Webb, through his poetry, chose his own inclusion on this journey. I do not intend to say that there was a similarity between my theoretical frame and the works of Francis Webb which included him, but rather that my search for a single poetic voice *coincided* with my discovery of Webb’s poetry and the critical surveys of his life and works by Michael Griffiths and Bill Ashcroft respectively. When I had completed a number of the theory chapters, it became clear that there needed to be a consistent poetic voice to give reality and depth to an otherwise overly abstract theory. The theory seemed dead without a living poetic voice to bring it into the actuality of its truth. By alternating between chapters of theory and chapters of poetry, each is magnified by the other, especially as the poetry exhibits aspects pertinent to my study. This too creates a dialectic from which a greater enrichment of experience is negotiated. Hegel identified theory as a negative of the intuited experience of reality. By placing theory into juxtaposition with particular poetry, a dialectical synthesis between their essential differences yields significant fruit, especially in the later chapters. Furthermore, by uncovering how we are to read poetic language and what we might expect from our exegesis, we will be able to disclose the philosophy in Francis Webb’s poetry.

The choice of Francis Webb over other poets was purely personal. I could have used Samuel Taylor Coleridge perhaps to even greater effect since I have spent many years studying

both his poetry and the literary-critical corpus devoted to it. If there were anything that persuaded me to use Webb, it was simply the desire to acknowledge a great *Australian* poet with whom I felt a certain affinity (his mental health issues with regard to schizophrenia bear a certain similarity to my challenges in dealing with depression, and his non-conformist religious convictions also bear some similarity to my own.) Australia is a country which hardly recognises its poetry, aside from the bush ballads of Patterson and Lawson, and I felt the need to add my voice to those poets and critics advancing the cause of a more sophisticated Australian poetry. However, I do believe that any sophisticated poetry would have served my needs, from the Australian poets, such as Judith Wright and Les Murray, to the aforementioned Coleridge.

This philosophical process will bear a close resemblance to literary criticism and, certainly, the literary critics provide significant voices of exposition. They appear in the poetry chapters in dealing directly with the poetry of Francis Webb, but they also make their appearance in the theory chapters. We are hardly able to draw a strict boundary between philosophy and literary criticism particularly when the specific philosophical project has poetry for its subject matter. Indeed, philosophy is considerably enlarged by incorporating these extra-disciplinary voices than is currently allowed by the protocols and strictures of academic philosophical practice. There are many more I could have included, since any thinker who has wrestled with the complexities of the nature of poetry will have value for our study. I limited the number, however, to those who seem to be directly pertinent to the concepts as I was outlining them. Certain literary critics could not be ignored, first amongst them being Northrop Frye, William Wimsatt and the structuralist Roman Jakobson. But in taking my cue from Paul Ricoeur in this matter, I considered myself to be in good company.

The chapters devoted to the poetry of Francis Webb were introduced to provide the inclusion of a poetic voice into the thesis. Without this concrete voice the thesis is far too abstract. However, it is recognised from the start that Webb's poetry does not develop according to the dialectical methodology of the theory chapters. It is also recognised that a tension between the two results. This is the basis for a dialectical process in itself, in which the theory is set out

from the poetry as a radical difference but also profoundly related. Furthermore, this tension is amplified by the recognition that, like Kierkegaard, the dialectic is a methodology of conception and not a description of the development of actuality as Hegel believed. This places us into a contradiction which cannot be resolved, since it is possible to exist in a particular “stage” without reference to another. However, it is generally recognised by the author that all “stages” exist altogether and should obtain a truer reflection of the entirety of poetic experience, all intertwining in a tangled confusion for the poem’s reader where occasionally one might rise into clarity then sink back into the general landscape of the whole. How this is to be played out within a literary criticism is a continuing work in progress. Unlike Derrida, this project has not emerged fully-formed from the beginning. I have relied mostly on the literary-critical voices attending to Webb’s poetry – particularly those of Bill Ashcroft, Michael Griffiths and Andrew Taylor, as the pre-eminent Webb scholars – to explicate the poetry, not only because a new kind of criticism based on this thesis is a work in progress mainly to be undertaken in the post-doctoral period, but because the imposition of my theory at this formative stage would necessarily be presumptuous and reduce the value of an independent poetic voice. Be that as it may, however, where it seems appropriate I have made links in the poetry chapters with the theory chapters, particularly where the poetry enables an expansion on the theory. Moreover, the application of a Kierkegaardian discourse of stages has also been applied to the poetry when deemed appropriate, in order to disclose some of the existential dimensions of poetry.

Webb faced a lifelong battle with schizophrenia, ending his days in a mental asylum. Yet even there in that desolate situation, the poet found grace amidst suffering. At least one major work about him has been written explaining his poetry in terms of his schizophrenia.¹³⁸ It has often been stated that his poetry is important *because* of his suffering.¹³⁹ Certainly suffering informs his poetry but it is not the brute fact of such suffering that allows one to engage with his writing in this context. It is rather that writing the poetry itself provided the poet with a way to

¹³⁸ Delmonte Rodolfo (1979) *Piercing into the Psyche: the Poetry of Francis Webb*.

¹³⁹ Judith Wright (1965) *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*: 217-18.

salvation from his suffering, even in the context of that suffering, and it is in this sense that he serves, like so few can, as a guide for us in our destitute time. Webb's poetry more than almost any other can show us what is important in the confrontation with existential desolation, for the despised inmates of the asylum found redemption even there.

The *defamiliarisation* of what we know, identified by Bill Ashcroft in the "lived metaphors" of Francis Webb's poetry,¹⁴⁰ is evident in both schizophrenia and poetry, making the line between schizophrenia and poetry very difficult to precisely map. Gregory Bateson justified his theoretical study of the proto-genesis of schizophrenia by identifying the role of metaphor in its symptomatology.¹⁴¹ Such conceptions are pertinent to Francis Webb owing to his lifelong battle with schizophrenia and it is certainly true that Webb uses metaphor with great facility. However, to therefore identify his schizophrenia as the *source* for this facility is, I believe, stretching credibility. No doubt Webb's recurrent bouts of schizophrenia informed his poetry as it would his whole life. That does not entail the borderline between his mental-health issues and the poems was breached. I doubt whether his incredible facility for generating metaphor would be possible without a profound knowledge of metaphor's ontological value which is apparently missing in the schizophrenic, otherwise all Webb's metaphors would bear the status of *dead metaphors*, killed as they were born. Given the obvious testimony of the ontological depths in his metaphors, there can be little doubt that although Webb's schizophrenia itself will make such depths of being available to the poet, he wrote with a clear and present understanding of his metaphors as metaphors that contradicts the identity of his poetry with his schizophrenia. It is difficult to believe Francis Webb wrote any poetry during bouts of his schizophrenic illness.

Bill Ashcroft identifies what he calls the "absence of the metacommunicative mode" in Webb's poetry; meaning by this that Webb does not often provide us with the necessary referent to his metaphors – the "A" in the metaphorical statement "*A is B*" – a part of the strategy in the poems:

¹⁴⁰W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 90.

¹⁴¹ Gregory Bateson (1973) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*: 177.

The absence of the metacommunicative mode in poetry, the gaps inserted to establish its difference and separateness, have particular significance to that relationship between writer and reader which seems to be predicated on the idea of writing as communication. The written text is an *act* in which the writer and reader are both reified and present to each other as functions.¹⁴²

Now this statement is problematic in a number of different ways, especially in the mathematic *reification* of writer and reader into “functions” in the manner of Roman Jakobson and of Jacques Derrida, but it also draws our attention to the important idea that poetry establishes its *difference* and *separateness* both from other modes of discourse and from other entities. A poem establishes its *exclusivity*. However, having said this, the typical divergence of the hermeneutic circle – perhaps an “outward spiral” like a snail shell – in poetry is a common strategy accomplished by the very paradox at the heart of a poetic metaphor proper, whether or not the “metacommunicative mode” is present or not. Furthermore, the claimed reifying action that converts the writer and reader into “functions” for each other, is neither obvious, likely nor desirable. This is the structuralist fallacy that became a philosophical world-view in postmodernism. A “function” cannot write or read with comprehension. A “function” cannot identify another in its exclusive alterity as another. Nor will converting the person into a “function” provide the essential basis for establishing the autonomy of the text; that process would merely transform all texts into simulacra without any *necessity*.¹⁴³ No, the autonomy of the poem can only be established by the autonomy of the writer and the reader in their exclusivity as beings. For only in that case can true dialogue be said to arise. It is curious, therefore, to note the extent to which Bill Ashcroft argued for Webb’s artistic vision, his Catholicism and his schizophrenia to underlie and inform his poetry. Surely that would be utterly impossible had the writer merely been a “function” of the text. In other words, the *person* of the poet is vital in order to bring the poem to fruition. It is necessary to locate the poetry in relation to the poet in order to find some correlates to aid in an interpretative critical discourse.

¹⁴² W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 90.

¹⁴³ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 37.

Often described in terms of its seemingly difficult and impenetrable language, along with a certain attraction to failed explorers, questions of Australian identity and, above all, the poet's Catholicism, Webb's poems yield much more of existential value than the usual somewhat distracting portages of national mythology and religious musing would have us believe. Bernadette Brennan says Webb's poetry is notably focused upon "absence and silence," a situation pregnant with important implications for our present existential predicament:

Yet as one 'slipping image' gives way to the next one finds that Webb's is a poetry above all of absence and silence. The felt absence is acutely religious in nature, but too often Webb's Catholicism is taken as a given and his poetry interpreted within the framework of Catholic belief. That framework of belief is ruptured repeatedly by the imaginative vision of the poetry, a vision that struggles with the possibility of an absent God and the certainty of an unknowable one.¹⁴⁴

Although, as Bill Ashcroft has shown, the poetry is abundantly suffused with the formative influence of Thomas Aquinas and Ignatius Loyola, Webb's poetry cannot be identified as a mere cypher for Catholic theology. It is a mistake to alight on allusion and metaphor as *sources* for poetry, especially in a body of work with such originality. The poetic image, according to Gaston Bachelard, occurs at the origin of the speaking voice.¹⁴⁵ The postmodernist's dilemma often seems to derive from a fixation on the confrontation with *inter-text* and how it is to be valorised in the face of the ever-present semiotic diversion from the text actually over against them. Bill Ashcroft, for example, offers a reading of Webb's poetry on much the same lines as Louis L. Martz does for the poetry of John Donne, seeing therein the face of Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* staring back from the poetry's structural advance.¹⁴⁶ It is easy to see why this form of reading has such appeal for the critic but sometimes one is left wondering if the reading misses the mark by clinging too tenaciously to Loyola's stages. Other allusions, such as to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or to Homer's *Odyssey*, seem to

¹⁴⁴ Bernadette Brennan (2004) "'Death and the woman': looking at Francis Webb's 'Lament for St Maria Goretti.'"; 289.

¹⁴⁵ Gaston Bachelard (1969) *The Poetics of Space*: xvi.

¹⁴⁶ Louis L. Martz (1954) *The Poetry of Meditation*: 211-248 *passim*.

have been overlooked. No single datum can provide a definitive reading of poetry. Even Ashcroft's own theoretical basis should have dissuaded him from attending so closely to the Catholic masters, though their presence is certainly in evidence. Not that I will avoid describing the obvious socio-religious discourses evident in the poems. All writing, including poetry, is grounded in such social discourses. No writing arises in a vacuum. The very words, phrases, ideas and idioms we use carry a halo of meaning derived not so much from the dictionary as from the contexts in which they are employed in day-to-day intercourse. That is not in question. Yet social discourses are not the *raison d'être* of poetry. Univocal interpretation that parades as the sole discriminator explaining poetry, however, remains highly contentious at best, and at worst, utterly false.

Nor will I be engaging in more biographical discussion than necessary to locate the poems into their proper context. There are works already written by accomplished biographers and I do not wish to encroach upon their area of expertise. Michael Griffith knew of Webb's circumstances from having worked as a psychiatric nurse at the Parramatta Mental Hospital where the poet was resident there during the 1960s, though Griffith declines having personally known the poet.¹⁴⁷ His conventional biography of Webb is clear and simply written and needs little further comment. Bill Ashcroft's much more literary critical study places Webb's poetry into a schema of discursive development, locating each poem according to its appropriate vocative identity in post-colonial discourses. Ashcroft met Webb towards the end of his life and seems to have been deeply affected by the poet. Each of these works, in their quite different ways, contributes valuable insight to the critical understanding of Francis Webb and his often densely-packed poetry. These and other writings on Webb will form significant voices in the critical study of the poetry undertaken in my chapters devoted to this task.

It was said that Australian poetry would look "very thin and sick" without Webb.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps when this comment was first made, little Australian poetry had appeared on the world

¹⁴⁷Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool: the life and poetry of Francis Webb*: 7.

¹⁴⁸Martin Seymour-Smith (1986) *Guide to Modern World Literature*: 193.

stage. Unfortunately, the remark was not revised in later editions of the book. The comment was made certainly before the great efflorescence of Australian culture in the years following the 1960s, largely as a result of the Whitlam government's reappraisal of public support for the arts which subsequent governments more or less maintained. Yet it must be said that Australians are not a poetic people, having restrained poetry in a straightjacket of cultural conservatism, as evidenced by the success of the Ern Malley affair in stifling the nascent Modernist movement in Australia. But Francis Webb's position in the annals of Australian literature is assured, though he died just when Australia was poised on the cusp of a cultural reappraisal. In a life spanning less than fifty years, he achieved several major poetic sequences and verse plays that rightly warrant our admiration. That he has been largely ignored by a culture that ignores poetry does not decry the quality of his writing but rather passes judgment on those of us who have been culpable of such ignorance.

I will focus for the main part upon the large poem cycles in which Webb specialised, although it must be underlined that the particular dialectical progression of ideas in this work does not comprise the historical evolution of Webb's poetry. The theoretical development I have employed to disclose the significance of poetry does not portray the poetic growth of Francis Webb. The conceptual progression of the theory chapters does not mirror the developmental stages in which Webb's poetry evolved. Having said this, it is not intended the poetry should merely be an appendage to the philosophy. The poetry provides both illustration of the theory chapters and a separate stream of critical exposition of poetry as philosophy with Francis Webb as a poet-philosopher. Having this dual purpose, the interrelation of the theory and Webb's poetry, indirectly enhances both. The conclusion outlining an ethics of the poetic spirit arose as a direct consequence of the dialectical interconnection of theory and poetry.

Case Study Chapter contents

A Drum for Ben Boyd is constructed around the voices and characters of people who either knew Boyd or were affected by his coming to Two-fold Bay. They form the drum around the hollow centre that is Boyd himself. The metaphor of the drum in the title is plainly

ambiguous. The drum could be beating for Boyd as the enigma at its centre, whereby the heroic person remains ineffable. On the other hand, it could also signify the empty drum of Boyd as the hollow man. Each person tells of his experience of Boyd and the malign effect of his business adventures, leading to the creation and demise of Boydtown, a settlement based only on the munificence of Boyd's fortune and as hollow as the man. The misadventures that finally take Boyd's life seem to be a reflection of the man himself. But wherever we look for some sense of Boyd as a person, we are presented only with external portraits that remain forever incomplete. Webb employs the ambiguity and incompleteness of poetic meaning to paint an ambiguous and ultimately incomplete portrait of a figure that slips from the grasp of history. Yet, it is the ordinary people who confront the whims of Boyd who, I believe, are the true heroes here.

Within Webb's first "explorer" poetic cycle, *Leichardt in Theatre*, we are ushered into a lampooning of colonial exploration, to deliver a portrait of another "hero" who, like Boyd, escapes history altogether. This hero has feet of clay, and much of the poetic cycle is played out as a biting satire on the tropes of explorer as hero. Again, Leichardt emerges as a mystery, who nevertheless embarks upon a spiritual quest that will take him completely out of history altogether. The colonial image of the explorer as hero is undermined by his sheer incompetence, lampooned as a character in a pantomime. Yet following the high comedy of his imagined self, Leichardt finally achieves an authentic sense of self and embarks on his final expedition which disappears into the vast continent, never to be seen again. The mystery at the heart of the human spirit seems to be in inverse proportion to the visibility of the man. While he pursues his heroic dream, Leichardt is the hollow man but unlike Boyd, he disappears into pure spirit, no longer hollow but no longer visible. The absent centre of the God-like mystic is fundamentally distinct from the empty centre of the hollow man.

Another "missing" centre, the figure of St. Francis of Assisi fulfils the spiritual fulcrum, the central mystery affecting those whose lives have been touched by this most poetic of saints in Webb's most haunting poem cycle *The Canticle*. The personal dialectic of Kierkegaard in the conversion of the aesthetic stage to the ethical and religious stages could not be better illustrated

than here. These poems serve to mirror the lives of their readers, enriching our lives in fundamental ways similar to the characters described. Meaning is made meaningful in concrete ways, thereby taking the desolate person, distanced from God by the dominating sin of the “seven deadly sins”, into a redemptive relation with God. Once again, Webb understands the dynamics of poetic possibility, made a reality by the saint as poet, and uses it in positive ways to build a portrait of the human spirit in its finitude and in relation to the eternal thus becoming infinitely enriched and transformed.

In Case Study Chapter 4, *Eyre all alone* portrays the spiritual quest from a state of abject spiritual desolation, much like that bedevilling modern Australian society, to a long journey filled with suffering until the final vision. Here, Eyre’s deeper gravity is far more tortured than Webb’s portrait of Leichardt but he is just as hollow in the beginning. The journey in the poem through time and space carries the reader from affirmation of this desolation through the concrete moment to the eternal, not in the consummation of a long spiritual quest but through the eternality within every concrete moment which makes this potential possible. In making the poetic affirmations, the reader undertakes the pilgrimage undertaken by Eyre.

The poem-cycle *Around Costessey* concerns the poet’s journey through the spiritual landscape of the country surrounding the Norfolk village of Costessey in England. Covering about a thousand years of historic individuals from Harold at Hastings to Anton Bruckner, whose symphonies long inspired the poet, each era bears the imprint of a specific spiritual resonance rather than fulfilling a conventional history of action and reaction. The poetry serves as an auger penetrating the layers of the spiritual palimpsest that is the landscape. Through the relationship marking the conjunction of the poet walking through the landscape with his distantiation from the land, spiritually as well as in identity, a place is created which enables the poetry to point into the existential mystery at the heart of the being the poet discovers there.

Case Study Chapter 6 focuses upon the poem-cycle *Ward Two*. The play of faith in the face of a terrible doubt: in extremes of pain, from the pneumo-encephalograph, and in the mongoloid man, a “horror” Christ-like in his innocence, that both grant us a vision of the

spirituality within ordinary experience. From the gathered men of this bounded group arises a community. Our redemption from the conflicts inherent in existence is to be found, not in fleeing conflict, but in relation with the concrete reality of conflict's desolation. We must choose our despair, as Kierkegaard would have it. The way draws us through the becoming in a purgatory of the vicissitudes of suffering and the suffering we see in others. This concrete becoming points into the heart of the unchanging, timeless being of God. However, when a person does not address others in dialogue but lives solely in monologue, then the paths to the eternal *Thou* become blocked. This lesson drawn from the poetry will bear significant fruit in the conclusion when an ethics of the poetic spirit will be outlined.

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Theory Chapter I

On incompleteness: the indeterminacy of poetic metaphor

Indeterminacy in the interpretation of poetry has long been problematic for philosophical discourse on literature. On its own, poetic indeterminacy was sufficient grounds for expelling poetry from philosophy, its validity placed seriously in question. Positivism, as a modern expression of the rationalist project, has been instrumental in modifying the critical discourse in philosophy into a narrow technical or pseudo-technical language. The need for clarity has been coupled with the aspiration for certainty, thereafter rejecting all uncertainty as if it were false. Because poetic indeterminacy is intrinsically uncertain, modern positivist philosophy, until relatively recently, has simply treated poetry with indifference, at best, or with contempt, at worst. However, the presence of doubt is not sufficient grounds for declaring any experience false. That is to believe truth can only be absolute, along with Descartes.¹ But the presence of doubt does not convert an experience by necessity into a falsehood. So much of value comes to be summarily discarded, thereby reducing the search for wisdom to a mere contest over technicality.

This chapter reconsiders poetic indeterminacy in terms of its intrinsic *incompleteness*, a result of the dynamics in interpreting poetry. The significance of the comprehension of this aspect of poetic ambiguity cannot be overestimated. Yet, on the surface it appears to confirm positivist suspicions about poetry. However, identifying the incompleteness of poetic interpretation, like Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem does for mathematics, opens a broader conception of the word-world relation with profound consequences for philosophy. Those consequences, left unspoken in this chapter, will be left to subsequent chapters. For the present, it is sufficient to accomplish a realistic comprehension of poetic ambiguity.

My discussion will commence with a critical examination of certain literary-critical theorists, who give valuable insights into the nature of poetic ambiguity. Following this discussion, I will appeal to a mode of Gödelian reasoning, briefly outlining Gödel's

¹ Rene Descartes (1912) *A Discourse on Method; Meditations on the First Philosophy; Principles of Philosophy*: 79.

Incompleteness Theorem to identify poetic indeterminism as incompleteness properly so-called. Further consequences of poetic incompleteness lie in what is unsaid by the discourses framing the content of this chapter, which rarely deviates from the semantic plane or from the equivalent fields of semiotics and structuralism. Incompleteness of meaning might seem to confirm the rationalist assessment of poetry. However, just as the mathematical consequences of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem breathed new life into mathematical discourse, so poetic incompleteness will yield significant consequences for the philosophy of poetry. Within the terms of this chapter, the light shed upon the status of meaning in poetry will, in turn, yield insights for the existential dimensions of poetry to be explored in greater detail afterwards. More importantly, incompleteness is the first stage in a dialectical program to be followed in subsequent chapters.

The question of poetic metaphor

Percy Bysshe Shelley's most famous dictum asserts that the language of poets is "vitally metaphorical".² His *Defence of Poetry* (1821) remains one of the most influential critical tracts to have arisen from the early English Romantic Movement, its brevity perhaps giving it precedence in the critical mind over, for instance, Coleridge's compendious *Biographica Literaria*. Shelley explains how the metaphorical "marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension," therefore, identifying metaphor with novel relations not just between words or signs but, ontologically, with "things". He stands on the brink of something more in his reference to "relation" in a poetic context, which will become clearer in my later chapter devoted to this topic. Poets, the "unacknowledged legislators of the world,"³ fulfil the central motivation and maintenance of lingual renewal through their use of novel metaphors. However, eventually metaphors deteriorate into ordinary signs: "[T]he words which represent them, become, through time,

² L. Winstanley ed. *Shelley's Defence of Poetry; Browning's Essay on Shelley*: 7.

³ L. Winstanley ed. *Shelley's Defence of Poetry*: 58.

signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts”⁴ – that is, they become what we now call *dead metaphors*, univocal, fixed *terms* rather than entailing a living process of relation, no longer “*vitally* metaphorical.” Should no new poets arise, says Shelley, “to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.”⁵ The organic philosophy of Romanticism stands here, declared in Shelley’s exuberant discourse, yet still bearing the associationism then very much in vogue.⁶ Shelley, however, acknowledged the *living processes* of poetry, what we might deem its essential existential character. But the identity of poetry with metaphor implies the question of poetic language can be reduced to the question concerning metaphor in the context of poetic speech. Metaphor is poetry *in nuce*.⁷

Almost everything of literary importance, said William Empson, is covered by metaphor, whether simple, complex or taken for granted (presumably *unconscious*).⁸ Poetic metaphor is a particular kind of ambiguity. Empson’s first literary-critical masterpiece, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, attempted to identify, illustrate and account for the kinds of ambiguous figures writers and speakers regularly employ. Specifically, his central concern lay in ambiguous expressions as they relate to literary criticism, which takes as its proper subject matter, literary works essentially dissimilar to the Positivist formalism then dominating scientific and philosophical thinking. His overall definition of “ambiguity” is at once elegant and simple:

The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once.⁹

However, rather than simple polysemy, Empson’s definition of ambiguity entails the extension of semantic meaning to the literary context in a profound and original way. Within his work lie subtleties not obvious to the cursory glance. In many respects, much of what follows in

⁴ L. Winstanley ed. *Shelley’s Defence of Poetry*: 7.

⁵ L. Winstanley ed. *Shelley’s Defence of Poetry*: 7.

⁶ For example: William Hazlitt (1969) *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*: 6.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur. (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 243.

⁸ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 20.

⁹ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 20-1.

my essay is an elaboration of William Empson's thought-provoking analysis. It has long been recognized how much the *Seven Types* is foundational in character, acknowledged recently by literary philosophers. Certainly, Empson laid down the groundwork upon which a more extensive superstructure might be built.

The English tradition of critical discourse, to which William Empson belongs, employs illustration to demonstrate intent rather than taking the abstract path of the Continental critical tradition. In short, English methodology *shows* rather than *says*.¹⁰ In consequence, the subtlety of English thought is often overlooked by present-day commentators, because of the current predilection for explicit theoretical exposition. In keeping with this English predilection for illustration, Empson introduced literary metaphor with a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73: *Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang*.¹¹ There is, Empson says, "no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling" in this metaphor. Yet, because it is effective in several different ways at once, it stands as a suitable exemplar for his first kind of ambiguity.

Appealing to Kant, who opposed "analysis" to "synthesis",¹² Empson held that metaphor exhibits a specific synthesis of different discursive structures. Clearly, synthesis was for Empson synonymous with a combined plurality of allusion revolving around a single axial referent. Central to his many interpretations of Shakespeare's metaphor stands the destruction of the monasteries and abbeys under the reign of Henry VIII, each extra interpretation adding to the detailed picture of this event. There might also be allusions to incidents in the Vatican gardens in which some Popes had all the birds killed because their singing disturbed them. Yet this is precisely the doubt raised by metaphor, by any poetic metaphor, even by one as apparently clear as this. There is even a sort of ambiguity, said Empson, in not knowing which interpretation

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961) *Tractatus Philosophicus*: 26.

¹¹ Levi Fox ed. (n. d.) *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare*: No. 73.

¹² Immanuel Kant (1934) *Critique of Pure Reason*: 30-32.

should take precedence above others. Metaphoric ambiguity is itself ambiguous. Empson's assertion here has been subsequently raised to iconic status:

Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and *the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry*.¹³

Given both the ubiquity and the centrality of metaphor in poetry, a poem cannot be definitively explained by the critical eye – while an *uncritical* eye would as likely not bother to do so. To every critical interpretation of a poetic metaphor there is attached serious doubt generated by the intrinsic *is-not*,¹⁴ which returns us again and again to the poem in question. And when you imagine you might finally have complete understanding of the metaphor, something else arises to cast doubt upon your attempted hermeneutical completion. The important senses, Empson asserts, are difficult to identify and isolate from the plethora of possible interpretations but altogether doubtful if one will have achieved them even so.¹⁵ We remain unsure of a metaphor's sense and unsure of our ability to enumerate the many different possibilities. No critique can be exhaustive.

According to Empson, there are those meanings that only arise from a long and intimate acquaintance with the contingencies of existence, in which we tell young people: *You will come to understand the poem only when you have more experience of life*. Empson elaborated:

They mean by this not so much that you will have more information (which could be given at once) as that the information will have been digested; that you will be more experienced in the apprehension of verbal subtleties or of the poet's social tone; that you will have become the sort of person that can feel at home in, or imagine, or extract experience from, what is described by the poetry; that you will have included it among the things you are prepared to apprehend.¹⁶

Yet this account, so apparently plausible, remains solidly built upon semantics in which the significance of the reader's own self is largely overlooked. Poetry depends on the reader's

¹³ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 21. The italics are mine – CJW.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 248-249

¹⁵ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 21.

¹⁶ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 21-2.

sense of being [a being] to reveal its poetic truth. There, in the profound paradoxes of existence itself, where time often brings with it a greater degree of deliberation, we recognize a deepening in our understanding of what it is *to be* in the world. That is an altogether more complex conception than mere longevity in digesting information, as if that form of objective experience could provide raw data for poetic interpretation. However, Empson did say quite specifically how the poem “cannot be explained in language, because to a person who does not understand it, any statement of it is as difficult as the original one, while to a person who does understand it a statement of it has no meaning because no purpose.”¹⁷ He implied what Michael Polanyi will later call the “tacit dimension” of personal knowledge in describing the ineffable within human existence – in the sense that we have knowledge about which we cannot speak.¹⁸ While it is difficult to explain how ineffable existence contributes to the reading of a poetic metaphor, in its absence understanding would be impossible. This question will be considered at greater length in my third theory chapter on “enrichment”. A strong connection exists between ineffable existence, poetic ambiguity and how we are to interpret poetry.

Related to the growth in depth of understanding is the idea of “body of meaning” that gathers around a word or expression like a corona. Here, Empson described the senses of words that evolve from long usage and cannot be determined without endless complexity. Word-usage, he told us, creates a “body of meaning” that is essential to interpreting a poem. A word might have many *distinct* meanings, many *connected* meanings, many meanings that *require* its other meanings to reinforce them, or many meanings *uniting* together around a single relation or process.¹⁹ Indeed, the word “ambiguity” itself can signify: *indecisiveness*, *vagueness* or *obscurity* of meaning, an *intention* to imply several things at once, two or more meanings, or simply that a statement has more than one meaning. Empson referred to this as the “*ambiguity of ‘ambiguity’*.”

¹⁷ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 22.

¹⁸ Michael Polanyi (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*: 4-25.

¹⁹ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 24.

Though it might be useful to separate each of the different meanings, he said, “it is not obvious that in separating them at any particular point you will not be raising more problems than you solve.”²⁰ Separating the different meanings and how they link to one another in a poem, might not always produce anything of value. Analysis of this kind could irrevocably destroy the overall tone to be gained from the poem as a whole. That, I think, is a common experience. And yet, the realization of language in the poem’s concrete presence, calls us to intense deliberation upon words and their meaning. Poetic ambiguity imposes no obfuscation on purpose but invites an on-going process of reading, return and re-evaluation that constitutes a real dialogue of reader with poem.

Yet Empson’s reliance upon a relatively pure semantics has meant that those resonances of being from the reading of a poem go almost entirely unremarked. They do make an appearance in his ideas of beauty, with which we shall open the next theory chapter, but in terms of ambiguity, that they pass unremarked is a serious defect in his otherwise comprehensive description. Poet and critic Kathleen Rainer wrote that Empson’s writings remain within the “positivist philosophy of Cambridge” by ignoring an important type of ambiguity:

For all the complexities and ambiguities and relationships which he discerns are upon the same plane of the real. There is one type of complexity which he fails to consider, that resonance which may be present within an image of apparent simplicity, setting into vibrations planes of reality and of consciousness other than that of the sensible world: the power of the symbol and symbolical discourse.²¹

The same criticism can be made of Roman Jakobson, to whom we shall soon turn. Once we outline a theory of *mystery* in the poem as that which is *meaningful*, these aspects of “resonance” fall completely into place. Yet, it is my contention that this “resonance” is hidden but present in both Empson’s and Jakobson’s critical theories as that which is undisclosed though entailed by their theories. But to see why will lead us away from incompleteness of the semantic plane to existential and ontological mystery.

²⁰ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 24.

²¹ Kathleen Raine (1967) *Defending Ancient Springs*: 108.

The self-focusing message

Whenever one interprets a poem, as with a metaphor, no one statement of meaning will do. And the enumeration of many meanings somehow fails to satisfy the appetite for contemplation of the poem. In each attempt to interpret a poem, the reader is *returned*, not to some central meaning *behind* the words but *to the poem itself*; to the very words in their concrete presence. It is the poem that is endorsed within and above all its interpretations, becoming palpable as a work of art in its own right. Within a multiplicity of interpretive analyses, the poem continues to maintain its integrity. Gaston Bachelard, probably the most imaginative of the phenomenologists to have addressed the poetic experience, wrote:

The true poem awakens an unconquerable desire to be reread. A reader has the immediate impression that the second reading—very different from an intellectualized reading—is slower than the first. It is contemplative. No one ever finishes dreaming or thinking about a poem. And sometimes we discover a great line of poetry, one that contains such suffering or such a great thought that the reader—the solitary reader—murmurs: and that day, I shall read no further.²²

A poem comes into being as a palpable concrete presence in consequence of this process of hermeneutic return, a necessary condition underlying poetic interpretation. The indeterminacy of poetry opens the need for such a return, that our fascination with the poem is awakened by its indeterminacy, not dissuaded. It is useful to acknowledge related thought occurring in Structuralism before we consider what this entails for a dynamics of poetic metaphor and of poetic ambiguity as a whole.

A leading figure in the Structuralist movement, Roman Jakobson defined the *poetic function* of a poetic message as *self-focusing*, in which the message focuses upon itself. Jakobson characterized the poetic function thus:

The set (Einstellung) toward the MESSAGE as such, focus[ing] on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language.²³

²² Gaston Bachelard (1988) *Air and Dreams*: 252.

²³ Roman Jakobson (1972) "Linguistics and Poetics" *in* De George, Richard & Fernande De George eds. (1972) *The Structuralists from Marx to Lévi-Strauss*: 93.

“Set” is an unusual rendering of “Einstellung”, clearly intended by the inclusion of the German word in parenthesis to qualify the word “set”. “Einstellung”, meaning “suspension” or “cessation”, refers predominantly to an intellectual attitude or, specifically, a fixed point of view with regard to a problem.²⁴ Its use in this context asserts an intellectual position that is intentionally fixed upon a “message”, the fundamental unit of Jakobson’s linguistics. But “set” also brings with it definite overtones of mathematics. “The set toward” might be interpreted as the action of a mathematical *set*, a *class* $\langle a, b, c... \rangle$ or *matrix* $[x, y, z]$ of items pertaining to specific characteristics. Coupled with its qualifier, “Einstellung”, a mathematical definition is clearly intended by Jakobson such that the poetic text is imparted with a certain intellectual configuration. This way of thinking results in the distancing of anything poetic from that which is conventionally associated with it, notably feeling and emotion. One perhaps might see in such an implication the influence of Kant who identified aesthetic judgment with “disinterested satisfaction”.²⁵

Further influences from Kant are recognizable in the autonomous nature of the poetic *message* that Jakobson characterized as focusing on itself “for its own sake”. This attitude also reflects the contemporary Modernist creed: “art for art’s sake.” All Jakobson’s linguistic functions except the *poetic* – the *referential*, *emotive*, *conative*, *phatic* and *metalingual* functions – reflect a synthesis of the *message* with another of the factors he deems necessary for communication – *context*, *addresser*, *addressee*, *contact* and *code* factors respectively. The *poetic function* alone presents the message as essentially *self-focused*. Even when the poetic message is oriented towards another function, as in lyric poetry – according to Jakobson, it also focuses on the *emotive function* that in turn focuses on the “addresser” – that which characterizes all poetic messages is first and foremost *a focus on itself for its own sake*. The *message* here establishes itself as autonomous, disrupting all other factors necessary to the message. Jakobson also gives “autonomy” a particularly mathematical interpretation. The autonomy of the “poetic

²⁴ R. B. Farrell (1971) *Dictionary of German Synonyms*: 31.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant (1934) *Critique of Pure Reason*: 39.

message” is determined by its “self-reflexivity” and is, therefore, manifestly *self-recursive* – that is, it *defines itself*. And in being self-recursive, it exhibits all the hallmarks of a mode of self-reference. It is not by accident that mathematical discourse has made its way into Jakobson’s linguistic analysis. During a conference devoted to linguistics, Jakobson made these telling remarks:

The rapprochement with mathematical logic, the limits and prospects for the use of set-theoretical models in linguistics, but first and foremost the ties of linguistics with mathematics in its statistical aspect, were vividly debated here. Quantification was recommended as an aid to syntactic analysis, as an additional, auxiliary instrument for comparative linguistics, and in general as a useful, supplementary means, always presupposing qualitative analysis.²⁶

The fixed position asserted by Jakobson, through inserting “Einstellung” beside “set”, solidifies the operation of the poetic function into a strict univocal line marking a special case of semiotic rigidity and autonomous self-sufficiency. According to Jonathan Culler, this will lead Jakobson into misreading the poems he studied. His linguistic calculus did not grant an adequate tool for either interpreting poetry or even providing the means for disclosing relevant grammatical patterns in a poem.²⁷ Perhaps “set” should also carry the connotation of “to set in concrete”? Jakobson strayed into the minefield where signification was imposed by his own mathematical linguistic science.

While there are profound problems with Jakobson’s insistence on denoting all ontology with a mathematical discourse, “factors”, “functions” and, as we have just seen, “sets”, and so on certainly, he has recognized something of importance in poetry. That even here, the *return* to the poem, that is invited by the form in which poetic ambiguity takes, still makes itself fundamentally apparent and is central to an understanding of how we relate to the poem.

The process of returning to the poem, intrinsic to the act of poetic interpretation, or as Jakobson called it, its *self-focusing*, has the effect of *making palpable* the poem as a concrete

²⁶ Roman Jakobson (1971) “The Results of the Ninth International Congress of Linguists” in Jakobson, Roman (1971) *Selected Writings: Vol. 2*: 596.

²⁷ Jonathan Culler (1975) *Structuralist Poetics*: 57.

presence. Because it offers more than his critical studies lead us to expect, this insight of the self-focusing “message” foregrounding the poetic word as a concrete work of art deserves further exploration. Paul Ricoeur, commenting on Jakobson, wrote:

The idea is an old one; Pope said ‘The sound must seem an echo to the sense.’ Valéry sees the dance, which travels nowhere, as the model of the poetic act. For the reflecting poet, the poem is a prolonged oscillation between sense and sound. Like sculpture, poetry converts language into matter, worked for its own sake. This solid object is not the representation of some [particular] thing, but an expression of itself. Indeed, the mirror-play between sense and sound somehow absorbs the movement of the poem, which does not spend its energy externally but within itself.²⁸

The insight of the self-focusing message brings with it some significant repercussions for the semiotic model of language derived from Saussure’s highly influential *Cours de linguistique generale* (1907-1911) that Jakobson incorporated into Structuralism and thus became incorporated, *a fortiori*, into its critical successors, post-structuralism and postmodernism. In emphasizing the differentiation of the sign (e.g., poem) from its object (referent), self-focusing places the partition of the sign into signifier and signified, a primary distinction for all semiotics and structuralism, in doubt. “This [poetic] function,” wrote Jakobson, “by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects.”²⁹ Here, the fundamental dichotomy is transferred from internal to the sign (signifier/signified) to the external demarcation between the sign and its object.³⁰ This is clearly the source for Jakobson’s absolute autonomy of the poem. The poem, in being self-focused, establishes itself as absolutely *distantiated* from its referent. However, strictly speaking, one can no longer conceive of the poem as a “sign” or its referent as an “object” – nor, indeed, as a “referent” even – if we hold to Saussure’s definition of these terms. The conventional material of the signifier imposes, radically, upon the material located by semiotics in the signified. And vice versa.

²⁸ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 224-5.

²⁹ Roman Jakobson.(1972) “Linguistics and Poetics”: 93.

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 144-5.

The term “referent”, migrating from Fregean semantics into structuralism, presumes not merely an object external to the poem, but the action of *referring to it* by the poem. Such reference is increasingly ambiguous through what Jakobson conceives as a bifurcation of referential vectors that he calls “split reference”. The problem, however, with “split-reference” is the normative presumption of the centrality of the Fregean notion of univocal reference, underlying all relations between language and world. This is not only far from obvious, but utterly undermined by poetic ambiguity, particularly the implication of contradiction in poetic metaphor, which I shall treat below. Another dynamic operates here. What constitutes the nature of “reference” in poetic speech, draws our attention to the relation of a “sign” to its “referent” in a very particular way and, as I shall contend in a later chapter, establishing its *otherness* as a *Thou*. A poem *points* to the *truth of the relation* with the *being of the being*. This, it will be argued, goes to the very heart of the poetry project.

Speech neither remains completely neutral nor radically disconnected from the world as Jakobson’s absolute autonomy dictates.³¹ In ordinary and critical speech, speaking, naming, uttering words and sentences, serves to *pass over* the spoken sounds, effacing the signifying structure in favour of the object on which it fixates. “To refer,” therefore, means to *pass over* the referencing agent that refers to the referent. Tone of voice, structure of expression and shape of its enunciation, intrinsically determine the manner of the pointing-at.

In the referential function [wrote Jakobson], the sign has a minimal internal connection with the designated object, and therefore the sign in itself carries only a minimal importance; on the other hand, the expressive function [i.e. the poetic function] demands a more direct, intimate relationship between the sign and object, and therefore a greater attention to the internal structure of the sign.³²

Ordinary habits of everyday speech are almost universally held in contempt. As an easy *passing-over* and a just as easy termination in conventional definition, habitual speech rarely

³¹ Michael Hamburger (1972) *The Truth of Poetry*: 34.

³² Roman Jakobson (1980) “The Dominant” *in* Jakobson, Roman. *Selected Writings: Vol. 3*: 753.

brings language into the foreground for conscious deliberation.³³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, wrote:

Naturally, speech of every kind is always capable of evoking image and thought. But in general, our speech acquires meaningful determinacy and clarity from a living context that is concretely realized in a situation in which we are addressed. The word spoken in such a concrete and pragmatic context does not simply stand for itself: in fact, it does not “stand” at all, but on the contrary passes over into what is said. [...] The language of poetry and philosophy on the other hand can stand by itself, bearing its own authority in the detached text that articulates it.³⁴

Poetry, alternatively, *dishabituates* or “makes strange” in Shklovsky’s expressive phrase, or as Shelley wrote: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.”³⁵ Language itself comes into concrete presence. There is a fundamental redefinition of speech within poetry that dislocates the habitual act of reference. But just this very return of the reader to the poem, breaking the common referential function, constitutes the palpable concrete-presence of the poem, thereby transcending simple Saussurean semiotics, while ironically placing Jakobson’s own critical calculus into jeopardy.

Significant to a poem’s coming into concrete presence are those internal cross-references derived from *repetitions of form*. Such repetitions include the simple repetition of a phrase, complex repetition of a grammatical pattern, and repetition of rhythm, alliteration or rhyme. All theory of literature must take repetition into account as a primary feature of poetry, even free-verse. Jakobson hoped to account for repetition by plotting all linguistic factors upon two Cartesian-like orthogonal axes, *selection* and *combination*. A speaker *selects* terms from the known group of equivalent terms (thus one may choose from “baby”, “infant”, “child”, “suckling” or “tot” and from amongst relevant verbs “sleeps”, “naps”, “snoozes” or “slumbers”, perhaps “dreams”,) and *combines* them into an individual message (such as Coleridge’s “the sleeping infant slumbers peacefully” from *Frost at Midnight*). The “selection axis” encapsulates

³³ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 119.

³⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer. (1986) “Philosophy and poetry” *in* *The Relevance of the Beautiful*: 132.

³⁵ L. Winstanley ed. *Shelley’s Defence of Poetry; Browning’s Essay on Shelley*: 18.

equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antinomy, while the “combination axis” determines *sequence* and is based upon *contiguity*.³⁶ Jakobson’s program here remains solidly Saussurean in character. However, the “poetic function” significantly alters this neat arrangement. “The poetic function,” he wrote, “projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination.” Accordingly, equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the message. Syllable, for example, becomes a unit of measure and so too phonetic stress. Such measure of sequence finds no application beyond the poetic function.³⁷ This generates a parallelism between the sense (content) and the sound (form): equivalence in sound, projected into the sequence as its constitutive principle, inevitably involves semantic equivalence. Thus rhyme, for example, gives an equivalent value to rhyming words that otherwise would have little in common.

In poetry, [Jakobson said,] any conspicuous similarity in sound is evaluated in respect to similarity and/or dissimilarity in meaning. But Pope’s alliterative precept to poets—“the sound must seem an Echo of the sense”—has a wider application. In referential language the connection between *signans* [signifier] and *signatum* [signified] is overwhelmingly based on their codified contiguity, which is often confusingly labeled “arbitrariness of the verbal sign.” The relevance of the sound-meaning nexus is a simple corollary of the superposition of similarity upon contiguity.³⁸

Although poetry is not the only area in which such “sound symbolism” is apparent, it remains the predominant mode of expression where “the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent to patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely.”³⁹

A reference to the thought of a group contemporary with Jakobson will be helpful at this point. Although the so-called “New Critics” – including Munro C. Beardsley, William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks – rarely if ever ventured into the field of linguistics, they bear some striking affinities with Formalism and Structuralism, both figuring Roman Jakobson as a

³⁶ Roman Jakobson (1972) “Linguistics and Poetics”: 95.

³⁷ Roman Jakobson (1972) “Linguistics and Poetics”: 95.

³⁸ Roman Jakobson (1972) “Linguistics and Poetics”: 113.

³⁹ Roman Jakobson (1972) “Linguistics and Poetics”: 113-114.

foundation member.⁴⁰ The concrete presence of the poem represents a major example of such affinity. William Wimsatt describes the poem as obtaining to an “iconic solidity”. Poetry, he says, achieves iconic solidity by generating extra relevance or “hyperrelevance” of the “interrelational density of the words taken in their fullest, most inclusive and symbolic character.”⁴¹ That is an excellent description of the amplifying effect caused by the reader’s hermeneutic return to the poem to generate yet more meaning. Therefore, Wimsatt says, the poem takes on the physical character that the stone statue does for sculpture or the porcelain vase for ceramics. “Through its meaning or meanings the poem *is*.” Hans-Georg Gadamer underlines the point:

The structuring of sound, rhyme, intonation, assonance, and so on, furnishes the stabilizing factors that haul back and bring to a standstill the fleeting word that points beyond itself. The unity of the creation is constituted in this way. But it is a creation that at the same time/ possesses the unity of everyday speech. This means that the other logico-grammatical forms of intelligible speech are also at work in the poem, even though they may recede into the background in favor of the structural moments of the creation that we have just listed. The syntactic means at the disposal of language may be used extremely sparsely. By standing for themselves, individual words gain in presence and illuminating power. Syntactic indeterminacy is responsible for the free play of both the connotations to which the word owes its rich content and, even more, for the semantic weight that inhabits every word and suggests a variety of possible meanings. The consequent ambiguity and obscurity of the text may be the despair of the interpreter, but it is a structural element of this kind of poetry.⁴²

Repetition of form, when judged a true parallel, implies an identity similar to that of a poetic metaphor (“A is B”). Accordingly, the same ever-present indeterminacy sets parallelism on the same path to incompleteness. No interpretation or set of interpretations will be definitive for the same reasons as poetic metaphor, with perhaps even less certainty. That does not mean

⁴⁰ Peter V. Zima (1999) *The Philosophy of Modern Literary Theory*: 40.

⁴¹ William K. Wimsatt (1958) *The Verbal Icon*: 231.

⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer. (1986) “Philosophy and poetry” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*: 134-5.

we should fail to heed it. The concrete presence of the poem calls on us to heed. Lack of a definitive interpretation does not indicate interpreting the poem is a hopeless task. On the contrary, its indeterminacy opens the way for deeper participation in the creation of meaning. But should we rest content with the illusion of a definitive interpretation, we halt on the threshold to a poem's true possibilities. Some deeper kind of significance is at work. Just what this entails will begin to become apparent in later chapters. But it was Paul Ricoeur who noted just how much the "deeper kind of significance" to which I am alluding is not open to the criticism that we have levelled at Jakobson:

In order to rescue the diverse meanings of "Being" from dispersal caused by the paradox that 'being is said in several ways', the philosopher establishes the relation of reference to a first term that is neither the univocity of a genus nor the chance equivocality of a simple word. The plurivocity of the ontological question, which lies beyond all language games, is of a different order from the multiplicity of metaphorical discourse, indeed implicating the polysemy of poetic metaphor. It is of the same order as the question that brought about the speculative field itself. The primary term – *ousia* – places all the other terms in the realm of meaning outlined by the question: "What is Being?"⁴³

For the present, we find it sufficient to recognize indeterminism interweaves every aspect of the poem.

Jakobson removed speech from its proper existential contexts in pursuing a science of linguistics. Analysis by Jonathan Culler shows that Jakobson's rationalist project, identifying and emphasizing only parallels of repetition, led him into seriously misreading poetry.⁴⁴ Rhyme or similar grammatical structure is not sufficient grounds by itself to enforce semantic parallelism. Repetition *might* imply parallelism but it need not. Once again, a reader is called upon to decide. It neither is nor ever can be, a hard and fast rule but is bound to the *Is* and *Is-not* that typifies the poetic interpretation.

⁴³ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 260.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Culler (1975) *Structuralist Poetics*: 60-61.

The paradox of poetic metaphor

Ambiguity holds a fundamentally different status in poetry from critical discourse. According to the cycle of interpretation called the “hermeneutic circle”, critical discourse involves a convergence of the hermeneutic circle. Indeed, critical discourse is necessarily postulated on the negation of ambiguity by qualifying and reducing signification to an ideal univocal clarity, whether this is achieved or not is, however, open to debate. Poetry, on the other hand, typically entails hermeneutic divergence in motivating ambiguity as an expansion of the hermeneutic circle, thereby retaining the capability for generating multiple interpretations or *polysemy*, according to Paul Ricoeur. Consequently, poetic metaphor operates in an essentially different way from metaphors in other discourses. There are subtle differences, for example, between the explanation of metaphor in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (possibly a later work) and that given in his [possibly earlier] *Rhetoric*. Whether this results from the different subject matter, from Aristotle’s degree of maturity or from historical problems in the way these books have been transmitted down to us, is difficult to know. I am inclined to favour the former, simply because rhetorical metaphor takes a more comparative role in favour of qualification, closely aligning it to the hermeneutical convergence typical of critical discourse. And that in itself gives us a clue. *How a metaphor operates must be a project of the discourse within which it is situated*. Poetic metaphor should reflect a radically different operational mode from its critical cousin, which would surely function mostly as a proportionate analogy, a special kind of simile, than its poetic namesake. The reason for this difference results from the manner in which the hermeneutic circle is motivated by each type of discourse. Poetry’s divergent hermeneutic circle both casts its metaphors in this mould but the expansive properties of metaphor also confer its hermeneutic expansion upon poetry as a whole and its cycle of interpretation. For critical discourse, whatever the expansive properties of metaphor as such, the tendency for univocal clarity calls for further qualification to prune unwanted meaning.

Although normally specified as a literary trope, a figure of speech – at its simplest, the identification of two incongruous items or ideas: the *literary* “A is B” – poetic metaphor invokes

a far-reaching set of characteristics beyond the function of a strange identification – in reality, the *literal* “A is not B” – in the overall context of the sentence or poem.⁴⁵ Ted Cohen, however, argues against the absolute identity of metaphor with contradiction. “There is no fallible sign that any given expression, spoken or written, is a metaphor,” he wrote.⁴⁶ Many metaphors, he asserts, do not entail a contradiction or falsehood: The *Is* does not always imply the *Is-not*. John Donne’s “No man is an island”, he claims, is one such metaphor. That this derives from one of Donne’s most famous sermons and not from one of his poems, does not detract from its poetic power to move us. However, Cohen has not made the important distinction between a critical metaphor and a poetic metaphor. He presumes the norm of critical discourse, wherein metaphor has radically different motivation and interpretation from its poetic cousin. The poetic metaphor has a greater tendency to employing paradox, where critical discourse must divest itself of contradiction in its tendency towards clarity. However, the expansive nature of all metaphor, even where that has been restricted to some extent by the qualification within critical discourse, implies a multiplicity of interpretation that carries with it the intrinsic negative of contradiction. Even the movement, as Hegel would say, from the intuition of the metaphor to the abstraction of its interpretation is a *negation* highlighting the metaphoric paradox. Yet, where the *Is-not* is apparently absent from the poetic metaphor, nevertheless, the multiplicity of its interpretations will continue to be prevalent, therefore imposing a state of an indefinite indeterminacy upon it. Otherwise the metaphor would constitute a *dead metaphor*.

Although claiming a metaphor has, in the words of Max Black, “another sense or meaning” in addition to its “literal sense or meaning”,⁴⁷ Aristotle’s deviational theory – metaphor as a deviant descriptor⁴⁸ – and Max Black’s interactive theory – the semantic interaction of a focal word with the contextual frame of the sentence⁴⁹ – both couch the metaphor in terms of a

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 248-9.

⁴⁶ Ted Cohen (1997) “Metaphor, Feeling, and Narrative”: 223-4.

⁴⁷ Max Black (1979) “How metaphors work: A reply to Donald Davidson”: 181.

⁴⁸ Aristotle (1965) “On the Art of Poetry”: 61. (1991) *The Art of Rhetoric*: 234-41.

⁴⁹ Max Black (1968) *Models and Metaphors*: 28.

semantic function alone. Shelley's statement of poetic metaphor's active vitality in denoting the "relations of things" indicates an ontological dimension that has barely been touched upon. Paul Ricoeur understood the centrality of metaphor to the question of interpretation when he began to develop his hermeneutical theories in earnest, evidenced by his massive study of metaphor, whose French title pays homage to Shelley: *La métaphore vive*.⁵⁰ His final chapter presents a remarkable discussion of the relation between philosophical discourse and poetic discourse and marks a significant advancement in our understanding of the ontological values incorporated in metaphor. However, a major omission is any reference to Marcel's ontology of mystery, the primary topic of the next theory chapter, especially since Marcel was Ricoeur's teacher during the very period Marcel was developing his philosophy of mystery. Marcel only makes a belated appearance in the autobiographical Appendix to the book.

When we come to the first instalment of the major poetry of Francis Webb, in the next chapter, the methodologies that underlie our interpretations of these poems, as with all interpretation of poetry, will hinge upon how we encounter and acknowledge the metaphor of poetry itself. There has long been recognized to be a certain incompleteness in interpretation of a metaphor and, in consequence, of a poem. It becomes most apparent when we paraphrase the metaphor because all interpretation at a semantic level involves the intercession of explicit or implicit *paraphrase*. Interpretation will be more or less constructed upon an intrinsic paraphrase. We remember, from the tedium of paraphrasing poetry at school, how such exercises omit something of value. Paraphrase somehow deadens the poem, but we are at a loss to explain why. Interpretation will continue to incorporate critical paraphrase while critical discourse is maintained as normative and primary.

Paraphrase occurs as the projection of poetic expression onto the prosody of critical discourse. The very qualification cycles of critical discourse serve to reduce metaphor to comparative analogy: "A is B" will be removed from its accompanying silent contradiction "A is

⁵⁰ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*.

not B”, as Ted Cohen clearly recognized. The dialectical tension between the literary *Is* (*A is B*) and its realistic literal *Is-not* (*A is not B*), which gives *vitality* to poetic metaphor, becomes subject to the qualifications of critical discourse, thereby risking the loss of all its vitality. How dry critical paraphrases seem. Yet how different is one paraphrase from another, no two identical. How do we decide which paraphrase has priority? The critical act remains intrinsically of considerable worth but, with good reason, poetic metaphor slips through the net of its taxonomies and points steadfastly to realms of being that cannot be appropriated by critical discourse. However, as we shall see, they can be critically identified.

The return to the poem within interpretation transfers the logical contradiction of *Is/Is-not*, made more pointed by Jakobson’s “self-focusing”, to higher levels of discourse. In each interpretational paraphrase, the return to the poem’s words implies that the words themselves are part and parcel of the solution to the problem of their signification. That is, the solution to the problem of the words’ semantic sense incorporates a restatement of the actual words, themselves, of the poem. The problem – *what is the meaning of these words?* – encroaches upon its own solution – *this is what they mean* – in a quite non-critical way. Of profound importance, this specific condition of poetic interpretation has far-reaching repercussions for all understanding of the nature of poetry, consequences that extend well beyond the project of this chapter alone. For the present, however, it is sufficient to note how the encroachment of the poem onto its own solution contradicts a primary motif of critical discourse, in which a *problem* must always be *kept separate* and *distinct* from its *solution*. The poem, as that which instigates the problem of its meaning, is *embedded* in its own solution. The logical condition of this encroachment results in infinite regress. We are thus confronted by an ever-present problematic for which no definitive solution will be ultimately forthcoming.

Gödelian Incompleteness

If the logical structure of embeddedness and its ever-present problematic appears familiar, it is because Kurt Gödel used precisely this logical structure in his famous

Incompleteness Theorem of 1931.⁵¹ Fortunately for those for whom mathematics, especially the complex mathematical logic of Gödel, remains an arcane language, J. Findlay has translated Gödel's logical sentence into a natural language, so we can briefly study his logical structure without struggling with the elegant if complex mathematics and the three modes of lingual truth that Gödel mobilizes.⁵² Mathematician Alonzo Church was highly critical of Findlay's exposition, aside from his translation of Gödel's sentence into ordinary English.⁵³ Findlay's paper, he says, needs to be read in conjunction with "other more accurate accounts" of Gödel's theorem to avoid being misled. My explication, albeit extremely brief, has been written in the light of other descriptions of Gödel's work, including those of Nagel and Newman's classic exposition *Gödel's Proof*, and Douglas Hofstadter's sprawling entertainment *Gödel, Escher, Bach*. Findlay paraphrased Gödel's sentence as follows:

*We cannot prove the statement which is arrived at by substituting for the variable in the statement form 'We cannot prove the statement which is arrived at by substituting for the variable in the statement form Y the name of the statement form in question' the name of the statement form in question.*⁵⁴

When you indeed substitute for **Y** the name of the "statement form" – the statement inside the quotation marks referring to **Y** – it *says of itself* that if true it cannot be *proved*. Embedding the statement within itself, on and on through every "level" of discourse, reinforces its assertion that it cannot be proved, an affirmation like the proverbial turtles: there are assertions that cannot be proved *all the way down*. And how true that assertion is because *all the way down* its proof is always undermined by the reappearance of the assertion and its problematic inside its own proof. No absolute proof is forthcoming and none will ever be forthcoming.

⁵¹ Kurt Gödel (1992) *On formally undecidable propositions of Principia Mathematica and related systems*. [Über Formal Unentscheidbare Sätze der *Principia Mathematica* und Verwandter Systeme, I.]

⁵² Palle Yourgrau (2001) *A World Without Time: The forgotten legacy of Gödel and Einstein*: 60-2.

⁵³ Alonzo Church (1942) [Review:] J. Findlay's "Goedelian sentences: a non-numerical approach": 129-30.

⁵⁴ J. Findley (1942) "Goedelian sentences: a non-numerical approach": 262.

Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem is a profound thought with implications well beyond its mathematical birthplace. Gödel's sentence shows there are *self-evident truths* constructed within a formal system that cannot be proved as logically-deduced theorems from the primary set of axioms that underpin formal systems. Thus, the systemic consistency – truth by proof is truth of consistency – of axiomatic systems of sufficient richness with arithmetic as one of their bases, remains formally *undecidable*. There are true statements generated by a formal system that *cannot be proved* using that formal system. Such formal systems include science and any other mode in which numbers and the assumptions surrounding them are incorporated, which indicts practically the whole of critical discourse. And Gödel's theorem quite clearly shows that formal systems of sufficient richness shall remain forever *incomplete* as a consequence. But can we complete the system by including the Gödelian sentence as a new axiom in its own right to the set of axioms defining the formal system?

If we should add the Gödelian sentence to the group of axioms at the base of, say, arithmetic and make of it another axiom, would the formal system be complete? The answer is a resounding “No!” By adding the Gödelian sentence as a new axiom, producing a new formal system accordingly, we find that new system itself can generate another Gödelian sentence. And by adding *that* sentence as yet another axiom, we find this too can generate Gödelian sentences. By the use of self-referential and self-asserting sentences, we might go on *ad infinitum*. The expanded systems shall always remain logically incomplete.⁵⁵ Michael Polanyi wrote:

This shows [...] that we never know altogether what our axioms mean, since if we knew, we could avoid the possibility of asserting in one axiom what another denies. This uncertainty can be eliminated for any particular deductive system by shifting it into a wider system of axioms, within which we may be able to prove the consistency of the original system. But any such proof will still remain uncertain, in the sense that the consistency of the wider system will always remain undecidable.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Earnest Nagel & James Newman (1959) *Gödel's Proof*.

⁵⁶ Michael Polanyi (1958) *Personal Knowledge*: 259.

Incompleteness in Royce's philosophy

Something like Gödel's reasoning was used by Josiah Royce⁵⁷ to undermine belief in absolute scepticism, on the one hand, and a shallow belief in Empiricism, on the other. A short digression is worthwhile to show a particular application of Gödel-like reasoning. Were I to assert: "There may be no money in that purse over there", I certainly assume the existence of such a purse in order to render this doubt possible.⁵⁸ Should the purse not really exist in reality, then that doubt would be found to be meaningless, since it is nonsensical either to affirm or deny it contains money. Error in this case arises in supposing the purse were real. If, however, were I to ignore for the moment the doubt concerning the money in the purse, and question, instead the existence of the purse, then I need to assume the existence of the room in which the purse exists in order to assert that the purse itself exists. And in order to assuage my doubt that the room exists, I need to assume that the building, in which the room exists, also exists. And to assuage my doubts that the building exists I appeal to the environment on which the building is situated. Finally, in order to assume the reality of the environment, I need to assume the whole universe in which this place exists. But should I go further and doubt the existence of the universe as I conceive to be only a product of my thought, what does my doubt mean? Royce's argument, therefore, falls into a paradox equal to that of Gödel:

If it is to be doubt with any real sense, it must be a doubt still with an object before it. It seems then to imply an assumed order of being, in which there are at least two elements, my lonely thought about the universe, and an empty environment of this thought, in which there is, in fact no universe. But this empty environment, whose nature is such that my thought does wrong to suppose to be a universe, what is that?⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Josiah Royce was a major influence on the philosophy of Existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel, whose doctoral thesis and first book was on Royce's metaphysics: Marcel, Gabriel (1956b) *Royce's Metaphysics* Tr. Virginia and Gordon Ringer. Chicago, Illinois: Henry Regnery. This is important to note because Marcel's paper on the *ontological mystery* forms the backbone of my second Theory Chapter: "On Mystery."

⁵⁸ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 51.

⁵⁹ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 51.

Royce's reasoning takes the same shape as Gödel's famous theorem. All judgements are contingent and, therefore, incomplete. In order to posit a degree of certainty concerning judgement, Royce claims "Either there is no such thing as error, which statement is a flat contradiction, or else there is an infinite unity of conscious thought to which is present all possible truth."⁶⁰ Of course, he means the existence of God as the infinite thought. But the existence of such an infinitely absolute judge is not altogether without doubt. Faith, as we shall discover in a later chapter "On Relation", requires the active application of doubt but Royce is seeking a certainty for which there is no answer and for precisely the reasons that he himself laid down. A judgement, he said, can only be judged an error by inclusion in a "higher thought", that is richer and contains a greater explanatory power.⁶¹ Therefore, the end of the series must, in his view, be an absolute and infinite thought. The terminus of the argument is itself open to considerable doubt and has been judged a "sleight-of-hand" by at least one of his reviewers.⁶² It was unlikely that Royce himself ever settled for any of his revised definitions of the Absolute that he made throughout his career.⁶³ Ultimately, the search for absolute certainty no longer forms the basis of the philosophical project, and we do not find Royce's arguments to the contrary quite as convincing.⁶⁴ All our judgements cannot be rendered completely certain owing to their fundamental incompleteness.

However, for Royce, the *community of interpretation* made the interpretation possible on a human scale in the firm knowledge of its essential incompleteness, without incurring an absolute relativism.⁶⁵ The triadic form of such a community incorporates at least three persons: the person whose thought is to be interpreted; the person who is interpreter, and the person for whom the interpretation is made.⁶⁶ The threefold community has the goal of an ideal unity of

⁶⁰ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 69.

⁶¹ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 73.

⁶² Joseph L. Blau (1956) "Royce's Theory of Community": 92.

⁶³ Horace M. Kalle. (1956) "Remarks on Royce's Philosophy": 136.

⁶⁴ Joseph L. Blau (1956) "Royce's Theory of Community": 92.

⁶⁵ Gabriel Marcel (1956b) *Royce's Metaphysics*: 21-22.

⁶⁶ Gabriel Marcel (1956b) *Royce's Metaphysics*: 125.

insight, a mediation that enables understanding to be undertaken and determined through participation in the *spirit of the community*. And while the interpreter is also chief mediator between the person to be interpreted and the person for whom the interpretation is to be made, she or he is also the *servant* in that her or his interpretation is of something beyond her or himself.⁶⁷ We will have recourse to the intrinsic community, to which we are apart in the poetic act, in the chapter devoted to this topic: “On Community”.

Derrida and the undecidability of writing

In an early work, an extended introduction to Edmund Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*,⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida applied the Gödelian paradigm not only to the *mathesis* of Husserl’s phenomenology, but to the very condition of writing itself to determine meaning. The question of *undecidability* not only made itself apparent in axiomatic geometry, Euclid’s axiomatic structure serving as the model deductive system for all mathematical sciences, but, according to Derrida, in all writing. Repeatedly throughout his writings, Derrida stated that *nothing can be decided*. The intrinsic contradiction of the decisiveness of undecidability, clearly made itself felt: The principle of undecidability that began with Gödel, made a huge impact upon the whole of Derrida’s philosophy. Yet the possibilities of contingent decision still made valid by Gödel’s theorem were ignored by Derrida’s “nothing can be decided” because of his treatment of the intrinsic negative and positive.

Rather than interacting in a dialectical sense by transcending antinomy, in Derrida the negative and positive both cancel each other out, yet continue to be maintained in an embrace that renders each a ghostly presence without presence. Thus, Derrida in *Word and Difference* determined that the Saussurean sign, constructed of a signifier and a signified, would both eschew and maintain its signification structure, especially with respect to the signified, to become a nothingness, a *trace*, without the structural centre to decide meaning,⁶⁹ and indeed,

⁶⁷ Gabriel Marcel (1956b) *Royce’s Metaphysics*: 125.

⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida (1978a) *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida (1978b) *Writing and Difference*: 279-80.

without any decidability whatsoever. However, he argued, the sign cannot be relinquished because a certain metaphysical complicity cannot be abandoned without also abandoning the critique directed against this complicity, or without risking the removal of the “difference in the self-identity of a signified reducing its signifier into itself or, amounting to the same thing, simply expelling its signifier outside itself.”⁷⁰ The trace of the sign remains posited though it has also been negated. The choice, therefore, to be made between the “self-returning paradox of the metaphysics of the sign in the destruction of the metaphysics of the sign and the overcoming of the critique by the critique itself, *cannot actually be made*.”⁷¹

Derrida wrote that the decision cannot be made between two forms of the “interpretation of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play”, in short, of hermeneutics⁷² – one in *deciphering a truth* which escapes play and the order of the sign by adhering to presence; the other *affirming fictive play* and attempting to pass *beyond man and humanism and presence*:

I do not believe that today there is any question of *choosing*— in the first place because here we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial; and in the second, because we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference.⁷³

Yet, the *deferment*, instantiated in Derrida’s neologism “différance”, insists upon eschewing the signified onto-theological ground, the being of that which is signified, and relieving the signifier of its signification dimension, to be determined a “trace”, in a discrete but, unfortunately, devious negation. Hence the elliptical mode in which Derrida engaged his critical deconstruction of texts:

The writing of the origin, the writing that retraces the origin, tracking down signs of its disappearance, the lost writing of the origin. [...] But what disposes it in this way, we now know, is not the origin, but that which takes its place; which is not, moreover, the opposite of an origin. It is not absence instead of presence, but a

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida (1978b) *Writing and Difference*: 281.

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida (1978b) *Writing and Difference*: 281.

⁷² Jacques Derrida (1978b) *Writing and Difference*: 292.

⁷³ Jacques Derrida (1978b) *Writing and Difference*: 295.

trace which replaces a presence which has never been present, an origin by means of which nothing has begun.⁷⁴

“Trace” has been considered more essential to Derrida than even the concept of “writing” because without the “trace” there can be no writing as such.⁷⁵ His understanding of this concept is not static in the sense of a trace that has been left as a result of a prior action, but dynamic, movement as much as substantive: a *perdurance towards the future* as well as *retention* of the past.⁷⁶ The trace is “nothing”, indeed barely substantive at all. In French the word “trace” might be rendered in reverse as “écart”; in English *écart* translates *distance, difference, divergence, interval, space, spacing*⁷⁷ by which Derrida’s ellipsis is construed. Through this cryptic linguistic device, or sleight of hand, Derrida conceives difference, derived from Saussurean linguistics, as granting form in the reduction of the phonic substance:

Here the appearing and functioning of difference presupposes an originary synthesis not preceded by any absolute simplicity. Such would be the originary trace. Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear. It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the *pure* movement which produces difference. *The (pure) trace is différance*.⁷⁸

According to Derrida, the geometrical axioms, that enable the formation of deducible propositions cannot represent the *origin* – “primordial act of grounding” – because they are already manifest within the mathematical project as a product of mathematical conception. Axioms already presuppose the “sedimentation of sense” which itself supposes a prior “primordial evidence, a radical ground which is already past”, exiled from the origins to which Husserl wished to return.⁷⁹ Undecidability, aside from its negative dependence upon decidability, the ideal to which it is irreducibly bound, retains a mathematical value vaster than the project of

⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida (1978b) *Writing and Difference*: 295.

⁷⁵ Christopher Johnson. (1987) *Derrida: The Scene of Writing*: 42.

⁷⁶ Christopher Johnson. (1987) *Derrida: The Scene of Writing*: 42.

⁷⁷ Christopher Johnson. (1987) *Derrida: The Scene of Writing*: 42-3.

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida (1976) *Of Grammatology*: 62

⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida (1978a) *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*: 55.

substantive definiteness itself.⁸⁰ Should the axioms and theorems constitute the Origin, the origin itself would be ultimately subject to the limitations of Gödel's theorem. Derrida exclaims: "But that is not so!" The *primordial origin* which grounded the mathematical project, including Gödelian undecidability, is not to be found in the axioms but in the eroded sedimentation of sense (Pre-sense? Presence?) for an axiom is in principle the result of a primordial sense-fashioning.⁸¹ The origin, a place without origination yet underpinning the entire historicity of geometrical mathematics, is eroded into the sedimentation that layers all geometry. Yet, and this is clear from Derrida, axiomatic system supposes a primordial evidence, a radical ground which is already past, withdrawn like Heidegger's withdrawal of Being – to which we shall turn in the next theory chapter, "On Mystery" – already absent, as Derrida wrote: "It is then already exiled from the origins to which Husserl now wishes to return."⁸² It is and is not, as an origin or as an axiomatic proposition. Heidegger's withdrawal of Being, however, has withdrawn but, as he says: "What is more present than it is?"⁸³ Language is the dwelling house for being, Heidegger also said. Heidegger understood that absence is itself a mode of presence, but Derrida dismisses presence altogether.⁸⁴

Derrida has gone much further than any of the commentators we have considered so far through his application of (absolute) undecidability to writing, to *all writing*, including his own writing, *especially* his own writing. This eliminates the possibility for any choosing. His comment on Freud might equally apply to himself:

An equality of resistance to breaching, or an equivalence of the breaching forces, would eliminate any *preference* in the choice of itinerary. Memory would be paralysed. It is the difference between breaches which is the true origin of memory and thus of the psyche.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida (1978a) *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*: 53.

⁸¹ Jacques Derrida (1978a) *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*: 55.

⁸² Jacques Derrida (1978a) *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*: 55.

⁸³ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 7.

⁸⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy. (1992) "Elliptical Sense" *in* Wood, David ed. *Derrida: A Critical Reader*: 42.

⁸⁵ Jacques Derrida (1978b) *Writing and Difference*: 201.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida insists on the inauguration of the “destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the [spoken] logos.”⁸⁶ The truth immediacy of the spoken word is lost in the mediation of writing. According to Derrida, the *logocentric* trend in the Western tradition favours the immediacy of the spoken logos over the mediation of writing. Whereas the person is present in the immediacy of her or his spoken communication, for Derrida, writing mediates communication, therefore, leading to the destruction of the writer as existent presence. “There cannot be a science of *différance* itself in its operation, as it is impossible to have a science of the origin of presence itself, that is to say of a certain nonorigin (sic).”⁸⁷ This might be deemed a direct consequence of the structuralist project, that which also motivated Jakobson, in which the collapse of human presence to a functionality is taken by Derrida a step further, to the very destruction/deferment of all presence, including that which decides written signification.

Gödel’s theorem, however, does not lend itself to such an absolute undecidability or non-decidability, penetrating to the core of *all* writing. Derrida himself noted how Gödel’s theorem was developed within the very axiomatic mathematics to which it was being applied.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Gödel depended upon a substratum of self-evidence to grant great force to his theorem; employing three modes of truth simultaneously, as we have already noted.⁸⁹ The truth of writing still manifests in writing or Gödel’s theorem would have no consequence whatsoever. Of course, Derrida is far more subtle in his thinking than to collapse all semiotic structure to a single trace bearing little consequential meaning, otherwise he himself would be reduced to silence. While he appears to be a nihilist, his aim is not to deny the universe of all meaning but to remove metaphysical constraints – presumptive and prescriptive ontology, theology and logocentrism – that, he believes, have constricted interpretation of writing to a universal univocity which lies behind the “crisis of the text”. But univocity is not the only mode within

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida (1976) *Of Grammatology*: 10.

⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida (1976) *Of Grammatology*: 63.

⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida (1978a) *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*: 55.

⁸⁹ Palle Yourgrau (2001) *A World Without Time*: 60-2.

critical discourse – William Desmond writes of *four*, that include univocity, equivocity, the dialectical and the metaxological, the last of which he advocates.⁹⁰ Even nihilism is founded upon a discourse that both denies and applies meaning. For Derrida, that will counter any possibility of decision, even that of nihilism, which requires the significant decision of negating all meaning.

The interpretation of undecidability Derrida uses is absolutist in the sense that *no decision is possible*: the Is and the Is-not cancel each other out rather than rendering a tension between dialectical opposites and their subsequent transcendence. Gödel's theorem, contrary to Derrida, does not remove the possibility for decision. Quite to the contrary, his theorem indicates we can make decisions: *contingent* decisions, yes, but still decisions nevertheless. In terms of axiomatically deduced theorems, there is no question that decision has been determined by deduction, at least on the restricted basis of axiomatic proof. In very limited simple mathematical systems, the question of their *consistency* can be decided upon. Consistency is defined as a determination of the compatibility of axioms such as not to produce contradictory theorems. In an axiomatic system of *sufficient richness*, such as one which includes arithmetic as one of its bases, however, there can be no absolute test for consistency. This does not indict the validity of those axiomatic systems, except insofar as when contradictory theorems are finally generated, thus proving them inconsistent. The significance for the validity of axiomatic systems from Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem lies in the *contingency* of all axiomatic judgement. Science, for example, is not an absolute system of universal knowledge, no matter how much its tests against empirical data might convince otherwise. One remains within the hermeneutic circle, even within empirical science. But it is not the point of science to generate absolute universal knowledge. What Gödel has shown is that contingent decisions are, indeed, possible; perhaps, necessary. That they are contingent – located historically and metaphysically – does not detract from their obtaining temporal validity. Critical discourse, that which forms the core of

⁹⁰ William Desmond. (1995) *Being and the Between*: xii.

academic discourses, *tends* towards the univocal by applying methods of qualification. Those methods vary from discipline to discipline, according to modes of technical language in which terms are reduced to univocal signification prior to their application, or to the use of extra alternative description in order to sieve out unnecessary ambiguity, and so on. But it must be stated that, while univocity exists as an *ideal* of critical discourse, plurivocity and equivocity are far from stilled. Critical discourse only *tends* towards univocity. That all judgements are contingent does not detract from the importance for making them. Somewhere and sometime, someone must step up to the plate (a railway metaphor) and make the decision. Derrida's claims to the impossibility of making decisions can only be true if there were no person to place their trust in axiomatic systems, although there can be no absolute method for determining systemic consistency. Interpreting poetic discourse, which actively renders ambiguous language, such as metaphor, the openness of its signification meaning, allows for personal decision, indeed *requires* a personal decision. Gödel's achievement was in showing that self-evident truths can be generated in the axiomatic system which *cannot be proved by the system*. The poetic metaphor's literary *Is* and literal *Is-not* provides a beautiful example of an exact undecidable proposition. By indicating the Gödelian-like nature of poetic hermeneutics, we are not *denying* the possibility of deciding upon interpretation, but rather identifying room for a plurality of interpretation and to acknowledge the need for personal judgement. That all human judgements rely upon presumptions of ontology, theology and "logocentrism" (giving primacy to spoken language), according to a person's historicity and milieu, Derrida's most fundamental project is placed into question by this observation.

If there is anything that the poem can teach us, certainly in those cultures which write in a phonetic script, it is the profound connection between spoken language and the written, although both also exhibit some conventions distinct from one another: The written speech of a novel or a play is not so very like the reality of spoken speech with its false starts, stumbling, wrong words and misdirection. Yet a play, although usually written as a script, is delivered orally. Without the incorporated sound of spoken speech, especially in western phonetic script, poetry would lose a

significant dimension of its expression, most obvious in rhyme and rhythmic qualities. And like a play, poetry is generally written to be read aloud. At the very least, the “logocentrism” of poetry is certainly present. While there are many who read without sub-vocalisation, nevertheless, when most people *read* poetry they *hear* it, perhaps as a kind of internal ventriloquism. In poetry the sound of the words is of vital importance, as in Pope’s famous dictum from *An Essay on Criticism*: “The sound must seem an echo to the sense.”⁹¹ Writing and oral communication are neither uninfluenced by each other nor sharply discrete. Hans-Georg Gadamer said it the most clearest:

But there is obviously no sharp differentiation between reciting and silent reading. Reading with understanding is always a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation. Emphasis, rhythmic ordering, and the like are part of wholly silent reading too. Meaning and the understanding of it are so closely connected with the corporeality of language that understanding always involves an inner speaking as well.⁹²

The annihilation of the opposites in Derrida serves to eliminate both antitheses, not in a simple abolition of one into the other leaving nothing, but rather the elimination of the positive (A) and its negative (not-A) are *both* abolished; a double nothingness that, nevertheless, is a double *something* that leaves a mere trace of its passing. This leaves barely room for Derrida’s ellipsis, which he carries through to the very negation of itself. There, in the silence intrinsic to the written ellipsis – “...” – being is set free from discourse to be itself. Yet such a setting-free does not actually allow being to set itself free into discourse but, instead is cast into the silence that engulfs the writing, removing its being from all but the lineaments of the merest trace. Being is thus not set-free but imprisoned in servitude to the very silence that has it trapped. The reader is also drawn away from the intimations of this being, and thrown into servitude to anxiety, distanced from the very being that, in a more generous spirit, might actually set her or him free.

⁹¹ Alexander Pope (1995) “An Essay on Criticism” 1, 362 *in* Pope, Alexander (1995) *The Works of Alexander Pope*: 76.

⁹² Hans-Georg Gadamer. (2004) *Truth and Method*: 153.

Poetry creates a hermeneutic of choice, in the centrifugal movement of the hermeneutic circle outwards from the centre that is the poem. Poetry is not the only discursive mode that can achieve this kind of freedom but it provides us with a primary example. I contrast it with critical discourse only in order to provide a means of clarifying poetry's shape. Yet critical discourse in its conventional form, which aims to a convergence of the hermeneutic circle in a tendency to univocity, nevertheless, does not shackle its reader to the writers presumptions. Significantly, most writing cannot eschew all of its equivocality and that in itself leaves room for choice, let alone the choices involved in accepting or otherwise the judgements contained in that writing.

By converting Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem into an absolute tenet of non-decidability in all writing, Derrida has foregone his critical recognition of the relation of undecidability to decidability, and also the tie of incompleteness to the consistency of axiomatic structure. But more importantly, he failed to grasp the connection of incompleteness to its self-evident truth: that there are true statements that cannot be *proved* by the axiomatic system. This does not make undecidability into non-decidability. This does not relinquish all judgement. This does not render all writing an elliptical trace. On the contrary, Gödel redeemed the symbology of writing itself by emphasising the power of a *proof* that revealed that an absolute proof of consistency was undecidable. In other words, he set the very nature of proof itself free from the constrictions of axiomatic deduction. The writing of mathematics, therefore, became capable of encompassing the indeterminate. Gödel did not condemn writing to Derrida's universal unequivocal deferment.

Poetic Incompleteness

For the same logical reason as Gödel's incompleteness theorem, interpretation of a poem must remain *incomplete*. If the words themselves re-arise as a necessary part of every interpretation, each interpretation a logical consequence of the words' meanings, interpretation must logically be incomplete. There neither can be, nor ever be, either a definitive interpretation or a complete set of interpretations. As this certainly applies to a poetic metaphor, so it must also apply to the condition of the poem as a whole. It is important to note how the interpretation of a

poetic metaphor exhibits those certain characteristics bearing a remarkable affinity to the formal logical structure of Gödel's famous theorem, and for this reason, and this alone, a poetic metaphor remains hermeneutically incomplete. A poem's interpretational incompleteness *does not follow as a consequence* of Gödel's Incompleteness theorem, which properly belongs to the field of mathematics and those sciences possessing arithmetic as one of their bases. I am merely marking up the *likeness* in logical structure and drawing similar conclusions. While the pattern of the argument is the same, there is no other connection between poetry and Gödel.

The hermeneutic incompleteness of poetic metaphor (and of all poetic language) casts into doubt Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of hermeneutic fulfilment in the "unity of horizons".⁹³ "Horizon", in this context, means the specific grounds or discourses that are called up within the interpretative act enacted by a reader. Consequently, the "unity of horizons" provides the means by which interpretative completeness is thought possible. Accordingly, the *sense of being* mentioned above, that I believe is central to poetic interpretation, would constitute but a *single horizon* amongst a complex of many horizons. However, if uncertain indeterminacy is built into the very fabric of poetic interpretation, something goes awry making a "unity of horizons" impossible. No unity of this sort is feasible while undermined by ever-present incompleteness. Such a false unity implies a once-and-for-all-ness in interpretation allowing for no on-going dialogue between reader and poem. Nor would such once-and-for-all-ness lead to the all-important return to the poem. Something profound in poetic experience is lost should the "unity of horizons" represent the epitome of interpretation. Above all, we lose the chance to enter into relation with the poet.

Although a poem is hermeneutically incomplete, what is more complete than a poem? The poem has integrity. Any alteration of even a single word irrevocably reworks the whole poem. Should we use language other than the poem's particular lexicon to paraphrase its meanings, we lose those very meanings entailed by parallel and metaphor. It is a point of some

⁹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*: 305.

delicacy. Words in a poem cannot be altered by interpolating synonyms without irretrievably altering the poem. Critical discourse, on the other hand, employs synonyms and other methods of *qualification* to reduce and restrict the influence of distracting lexical resonances from a word's "body of meaning". The necessary univocal clarity in critical thought demands a converging hermeneutic circle obtained by qualification. Poetry, on the other hand, rejoices in these existential expansions. Poetry brings language to its full lexical presence in ways that are frankly anathema to all effective critical discourse. Of course, the "body of meaning" emerging from lexical usage incorporates a further layer of hermeneutic uncertainty to a poem's already burgeoning plurality of meaning. A poem cannot be written in any other way. We need to address the apparent contradiction in the way a poem seems to revel in hermeneutic uncertainty, on the one hand, yet exhibits no tolerance at all to lexical intervention of any sort, a kind of lexical rigidity, on the other.

While explanation of a poem's polyvalence has indefinite possibility, still the sense of the poem will neither be arbitrary, chaotic nor nonsensical. What binds interpretation together remains the integrity of the poem, made more present, not less, by the uncertainty in its interpretation. Around the axis that *is* the poem, all interpretation *revolves*, gently co-ordinated by the words that strike us in their singular concrete presence. Interpretation orbits the nucleus of the poem. And though uncertainty undermines completeness, yet we cannot believe in every fanciful interpretation without consideration of its degree of probability. The power for determining meaning does not rest solely with the reader. That would be frankly absurd. The reader does not write the poem, as has been claimed by certain postmodernists.⁹⁴ Instead, sense arises here in the dialogue *between* poem and reader and is not subject to invention solely at the discretion of the reader. What would be the point in reading, if that were the case? Yet certainly the reader is called upon to decide which senses should be given precedence. That entails a wholly different question.

⁹⁴ Reed Way Dasenbrock (1993) "Do we write the Text we Read?" *in* Dasenbrock, Reed Way ed. (1993) *Literary Criticism After Donaldson*: 18-36.

Poetry calls for *engagement* with its reader in consequence of its incompleteness. I believe Kurt Gödel implied an equivalent thought in his mathematics. He said there are truths which are *self-evidently true* for which there can be *no proof*. The appeal to a judgement about the *self-evidence* of a proposition is fundamental to the Incompleteness Theorem. Gödel's theorem, says Michael Polanyi, is a consequence of reflection on what is being said.⁹⁵ That is, we can *know* truths that cannot be *proved* by axiomatic reasoning. Truth accordingly transcends the limits of proof and depends heavily upon the person to judge its self-evidence. Metaphor, poetry and its truth must be dependent upon the reader in an analogous way. The reader's presence remains a primary datum in poetic interpretation in a radically different way from critical discourse. The status of the reader changes in accordance with the body of words to be read. We justifiably assert sense belongs *within* critical discourse and is far less conditional upon the reader than poetry. The primary inclusion of qualification into critical discourse narrows the field of interpretation – hopefully – to univocal meaning. Thus, the reader assumes a certain passivity – often called “the suspension of disbelief” – entirely absent from the situation of reading poetry. Whether the reader actually assumes such a role remains the decision of the reader. It is surprising that a reader's “suspension of disbelief,” to which novelists and storytellers especially appeal, comes to be necessary in the reading of critical discourses in science and philosophy. One finds the appeal to a “suspension of disbelief” in, for example, the essays of Sigmund Freud. Freud has been regarded in Germany as a “great stylist”, an idea that might be surprising to those who only encounter Freud through medicalised English translations.⁹⁶

In a very real sense, standard philosophical argument is equivalent to plainsong, while poetry can obtain the lustre of polyphony. If, therefore, I am arguing for a broader interpretation of what constitutes philosophy, it is not to disengage myself from the beauty of its plainsong but simply to argue there are more ways for philosophy to come into being than through the sparse beauty of its plainchant. The conflict between poet and philosopher has always been a false one.

⁹⁵ Michael Polanyi (1958) *Personal Knowledge*: 260.

⁹⁶ Bruno Bettelheim (1983) *Freud and Man's Soul*: 8-9.

In the next chapter, we come to a discussion of Francis Webb's first great poem-cycle, *A Drum for Ben Boyd*. This will serve as illustration of much that has been discussed in this chapter on the hermeneutic incompleteness of poetry, including its consequences for poetry's *meaning*, and as a transition to the following chapter on the related, but profoundly different, existential mystery of poetry, including its consequences for what makes poetry *meaningful*. While this critique of *Ben Boyd* will concentrate upon the conceptual apparatus outlined in this chapter, nevertheless, the poetry will incorporate much more besides, because it does not respect the methodological dialectic necessary for an effective philosophical portrait of the poetic experience. We do not presume that Francis Webb or any other poet will conveniently write their poetry to fit our critical discourse. Yet, there is philosophy in poetry, and this chapter presents us with a first opportunity to disclose what kind of philosophy and what form it will take.

Case Study Chapter I

A Drum for Ben Boyd

Published in 1948, *A Drum for Ben Boyd* was written at a time when artists of all disciplines in white Australian society were turning to the history of European settlement in Australia to generate a discourse of identity distinct from the colonial tropes of the British Empire. Explorers, for example, represent tropes that can be transformed into Nationalist heroes of the white-Australian conquest of land, nature and aborigine, the growth of an exclusively white-Australian character that received its ultimate expression in the notorious “White Australian Policy”. However, unlike these heroic tropes of empire or white-nationalism – usually given in the form of the panegyric – Webb’s poem-cycle revolves on a central absence, a lacuna empty of the hero who is disclosed only in the testimony of those people around him. Rather than replacing the heroes of empire with his own canon of relocated heroes, Webb subverts the very discourses of heroic identity then dominating the Australian literary circle. Yet, instead of the hero as a straw man, he actively denies access to this idol of our desire. Heroic identity itself emerges as empty as the figure of Boyd appears to be. It is this refusal to identify the hero along the lines of the convergence of the tropes of colonialism with those of Australian nationalism that has prompted both Bill Ashcroft¹ and James Paull² to read Webb’s poetry as postcolonial literature. Heroic identity itself emerges inviolable to the reifying public gaze that would appropriate and empty it of all meaning but under its own hegemony of desire. In a later cycle, *Leichardt in Theatre*, Webb introduces the public gaze as the means of satirizing both the mythic hero and his audience, us. Yet Webb does not treat his “heroes” without sympathy.

This absence allows us to follow the interplay of poetic incompleteness with expressions of identity, both in a personal sense and in the collective sense. The meaning of the central absence, around which the whole poem-cycle revolves, creates a space for critical commentary on the status of the hero as a trope of colonial and white-nationalist discourse and as a formal construction of heroic identity across the person and the society. The positive metaphor of the

¹ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*.

² James Paull (1993) “The Thematic of History in Francis Webb’s Poetry.”

“drum” of the title, on the one hand, and the negative space it connotes, that normally would be filled by the hero, renders interpretation contingent and problematic. We are caught between the literary *is* and the literal *is not* of Boyd’s ontological status, thus subverting all critical interpretation. Yet the very contingency of our interpretation is a central feature of the poetic cycle. Webb interweaves his questions of identity between those of the speakers, whose identities are far from critically complete, and that of the man they are describing. This is poetry of considerable philosophical sophistication.

The “drum” as metaphor

Although absent, Ben Boyd is a formidable if disturbing presence, a shadow falling across the whole sequence as an indeterminate but active principle. Identity, we learn, cannot be wholly grasped at second-hand. Individual interpretations of a person’s identity, while they reflect particular facets that might be true relative to the witnesses, yet all such knowledge must remain fundamentally and inevitably fragmented and incomplete both in practice and in theory. Webb employs the incompleteness of poetic language consequent upon poetry’s innate hermeneutic indeterminacy, as a method to highlight the fragility of human knowledge in the face of the unspoken subject. Likened to Orson Welles’s 1941 film, *Citizen Kane*, to which *Ben Boyd* has been compared,³ Francis Webb’s first poem cycle assumes a central presence only on the basis of the witnesses’ overriding inability to encounter Boyd except as a mark of their own fallibility. Boyd remains aloof from the prejudices which frame their responses. The portrait of Boyd reflects the limits of systemic interpretation to compound the truth of the poem.

At the same time, the poetic incompleteness itself *points towards* something that transcends these limitations of systemic hermeneutics. In this case, the empty centre is the operant feature. The very notion of a “drum” for Ben Boyd alerts us to this overriding metaphor and like all poetic metaphor, this gathers interpretation to itself. The “drum” is composed of separate, mostly distinct testimonies, a ring of voices defining the vacant space at its focus. They

³ Andrew Lynch (2001) “Francis Webb’s White Swan of Trespass”: 33.

are the “drum”. But each also character resonates like a drum, also somehow empty, either through choice, ignorance or enforcement. The absence at the centre of the drum gives the characters speaking in this drama the purpose by which they can move beyond themselves. In other words, in the absence at the centre lies a power that invigorates all those who surround it, either for good or ill.

An alternative interpretation yields not the drum of the people beating *for* Ben Boyd but the drum that *is* Ben Boyd. Contrasting the absent Boyd with the similar absence of St. Francis at the focus of Webb’s sublime poem-cycle “The Canticle”, suggests a demonic power that activates yet appropriates Boyd. Unlike the saint, Boyd cannot break free of his immanence in history to be a being in his personhood or create something of lasting value in the place and for its inhabitants. All that he built was transitory, passing like the whim that gave it birth. This juxtaposition of Ben Boyd with St. Francis echoes another similar juxtaposition in *The Hollow Men* and the figure of Thomas Beckett in *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot. Both Ben Boyd and the Hollow Men are devoid of true personhood,⁴ while the apparently equivalent emptiness of the saint is the place of inner awareness accomplishing the mystical union with God. “The soul empties itself of all its contents,” wrote Simone Weil, “in order to receive unto itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.”⁵ Incompleteness of poetic meaning points to the incompleteness of the person set before us in the “drum” metaphor. Ben Boyd’s hollowness can either signify an active principle – perhaps the enigmatic *élan vital* of Henri Bergson – or a hollow man who imposes upon the people with whom he has dealings. Contrasting with the *Author’s Prologue*, portrayed in the second poem, Boyd’s actions do not rise to the status of the poet’s creativity.

Ultimately, the centre, upon which the poems focus, remains empty and undecidable. The being of Ben Boyd escapes appropriation by discourse, and yet the decision we are called upon to make is whether this lacuna points to something more. We are called upon to decide whether

⁴ Andrew Lynch (2001) “Francis Webb’s White Swan of Trespass”: 33.

⁵ Simone Weil (1951) *Waiting for God*: 115.

the man cannot be fully understood or he is essentially empty, a hollow man. The act of *pointing-towards* is still accomplished when the object of desire lies concealed, revealing something significant in this very human act. The poems are a record of each fallible person who speaks as Ben Boyd escapes from our grasp. We learn more about those who speak than about him of whom they speak. Identity has not been expunged as certain critics hold.⁶ Those who comprise the drum unwittingly reveal more of themselves than they do of Boyd.

Every attempt to reduce Boyd to an effigy of desire or fear slips past its target unable to grasp the enigma presented by the man himself. Within the text, whether it is Boyd or St. Francis of Assisi, the figure at the heart occupies a lacuna. Webb will make such lacunae a primary motif of many of his poem-cycles from now on, as if to say the heroic subject cannot be tracked by the word no matter how authentic. Sometimes that lacuna is a human being, sometimes it is the very centre of the human being, as in Leichhardt, sometimes it is God, as in the poem cycle *Ward Two*. “Yet truth itself,” says Webb in the *Author’s Prologue*, “is a mass of stops and gaps.” Typical of much commentary, Harry Heseltine stated in his paper on Webb:

At its centre, where Boyd should be, there is a hole. It is as if, having fragmented the personality of his protagonist among the witnesses to his career, Webb could find no way to dramatize it centrally and directly.⁷

Heseltine ironically mirrors the attitude expressed by the arch aesthete “Our Roving Reporter” of the first poem of Webb’s Boyd cycle. That there should be an absence where we would expect to find a heroic figure staking his claim to history signifies more than simply an inability on the part of the poet to *dramatize* his central character. Rather, this apparent failure of language to encompass the reality of a person who was true flesh and blood, bold but fallible, serves as a philosophical exploration of the relation between poetic testimony and its subject and what it is that is really revealed in poetic incompleteness. Webb tells us this in the very title he

⁶ Q. *in* Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 53.

⁷ Q. *in* Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 53.

chose; it is, after all, a *drum* for Ben Boyd, an instrument whose utility depends on the empty space within.

That Webb chose two historical portraits, Boyd and Leichardt, both men who disappeared into oblivion and were later maligned by history,⁸ for his first major sequences was clearly no accident. The post-colonial cast of Webb's poetry, as Bill Ashcroft has identified, is most apparent here. While the proscenium of historical biography and of colonial discourse in their diverse ways both attempt the neat circumscription of their heroes, his anti-colonial hue and negation of white-Australian ideologies attracted Webb to figures that cannot be neatly dramatized. Much more upbeat than Heseltine, Michael Griffith wrote: "Boyd's elusiveness was the point of the whole sequence."⁹ According to Griffith, the person who escapes circumscription by the attitudes and tastes of history-building is freed from the strictures of society imposing its own brand of mythology. Ultimately, he says, the poet has no more access to the real person of Ben Boyd than those who seek to pass judgment upon him. Even in the hero's ultimate fall, the enigma of his being cannot be overcome:

And the man on the bridge of his own self-scuttled wreck?
You cannot picture him broken or prostrate;
Success was the terror that might have tensed his back
To an unnatural arc, turned him away, out-patient,
Healed, and thoroughly dead to his right mind and fate.¹⁰

The lacuna is neither the negative failure of Webb to directly dramatize his central character, as Heseltine believed, nor the mere elusiveness espoused by Griffith. It elicits a centripetal response that points towards the heart of being itself. What constitutes this being will bring us into an alignment with the ontological mystery itself that forms the topic of the second theory chapter. But not all Webb's characters, in this poem cycle, are treated as enigmas; only the hero.

⁸ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 49.

⁹ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 53.

¹⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 68.

The hero and his critics

Webb's subversion of colonial and white-Australia discourses, the latter a direct result of the colonial frame, occurs at all levels of the poetry. The particular poems in the sequence that might have borne the title of the man who slipped from the grasp of history simply bear no title at all. Whatever happens on the stage of experience, a person's being, memory and thoughts are her or his own and Boyd left no testimony to inform us of his motivations. Social or historical standing is a very poor indicator of a person's real being. The question of what makes an authentic life emerges as a central theme from which Webb will never stray far. Thus, the voices of the observers – a journalist, a boat builder, Sir Oswald Brierly, a whaler, a Papuan shepherd, John Webster, and so on – characters who bear witness, are assumed by the poet in a species of poetic ventriloquism.¹¹ Yet each stands on the margins to the central figure, always secondary to the events unfolding at Two-fold Bay. "True to myself," says the character of Sir Oswald Brierly, "I grew colourless, left no self portrait."¹² The characters pass judgment as they see the man and the events created around him, but in many of their complaints, there is little true participation, little true relation with Boyd. They slip out of focus, because they exist on the margins of the Boyd legend. The Pioneer of the Monaro says: "Time and a legend stealing my name from the earth."¹³ They leave no monuments, no mementos except an echo of their despair. "The number of people /Lunching on secret sorrow is really remarkable,"¹⁴ glibly remarks "Our Roving Reporter".

With the majesty of the natural forces of the storm that spreads lightning and thunder, the poet speaks of his writing the moment it springs forth with the same vitality and suddenness as the storm. Innumerable interpretations arise from this storm metaphor. The lightning tells of these flashes of poetic creativity. How broken are its images: edges and thresholds, all

¹¹ Max Schulz (1964) *The Poetic Voices of Coleridge*: 53.

¹² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 63.

¹³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 68.

¹⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 56.

jaggedness and fissure. Thoughts hang from cliff tops on the precipice to oblivion, the borderland of memory beyond which forgetfulness mercifully reigns.

Light quakes over the city, contracts, drives on:
The quickening and stir of music – baffling music,
Nomad of the heart's unease.¹⁵

The storm that rolls across the city can also be interpreted to be Boyd as an active mechanism of Fate, descending either as a sudden intervention of a natural force or as an intense disaster beginning to unfold. Storm and city and self flash and seethe, but in a moment they are captured in the lightning's flashlight, too fast to register any movement in its irregular stroboscope. Images appear motionless. We capture only distinct, static glimpses of a dynamic, transient world. Figuratively and in reality, whatever knowledge we obtain remains momentary, broken and incomplete, "all stops and gaps." The question of the stories we tell ourselves, isolated from the contexts that gave them their truth, teeters on the brink of falsehood.

In this crazy wandering light that the wind's pulse
Flicks on and off, when the lamps and the end of the street
Shake up in a pocket of dust, and the roofs of the houses
Daze headlong into a grey gulf of annihilation,
Stray drama comes lurching home like a late drunkard.¹⁶

Webb paints a picture of the threadbare town the moment Boyd's yacht docks: "And a young town grown from myths at the world's end /Where the south is a swaggering fantasy, not yet sober."¹⁷ The poet clearly identifies himself with the everyday characters that people his story, though they are limited and fallible. Each poem is a flash of lightning revealing but a momentary glimpse of Boyd. From them one captures only a fragmented, disjointed portrait of the man and his effects when, like the storm, he strides in, like a physical force, all flashes and tatters in the wind:

This is his life: the churned-up light and the dust,

¹⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 58.

¹⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 58.

¹⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 60.

A tattered scrap of life in the cubicles
Of memory with moths of forgetfulness,
Now and then out for an airing in the tangent flash
Of an old man's yarn.¹⁸

In all these "weathering fragments," the truth about the man and his motivations, his hopes and needs and visions, might lie hidden "with some quiet woman /Who will not shriek her accusations."¹⁹ The poet tells us that all those who met Boyd "mangled a shadow /Seized on some trophy, brush of a fleet quarry." He was as much a product of their desires and fears as they were of his. Yet even Boyd himself might not have understood what drove him on, or what forces were at work beneath the veneer of his ego:

Though all that he held was a tremor, a half-truth,
And the cunning essence had twisted away and escaped him.²⁰

What is fundamental to the self, that centre which underpins it and is its genuine core, is itself the most mysterious and impossible to grasp. We can sense mystery only in our living relation with it, through our own mysterious core. Like a window so clear that looking out we cannot see it and looking in from outside we can only see our own reflection reflected back to us in its polished surface, the self lives itself so completely it cannot articulate its own essence and for another person it remains a mystery in the world, understood only through her or his own mystery.²¹ Being withdraws, as Heidegger says it does,²² withdrawing from ever being pinned to the butterfly case, categorized and clarified by critical discourse. In each of us, that which is most present in us must remain the secret that escapes us. "No plough probes deeply enough to question dust."²³

Of all modes of discourse, poetic metaphor is the probe that penetrates most deeply to the core of that which makes a self an *I* and another a *Thou*, themes that remain central to Webb's

¹⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 59.

¹⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 59.

²⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 59.

²¹ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 170.

²² Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 8-9.

²³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 59.

poetry.²⁴ Metaphor marks the track of the mystery in self and otherness. And just as metaphor guards a centre that cannot be said any other way than as *this* metaphor, so alterity guards a mystery that we can only recognize through the mystery of ourselves. And speaking that *recognition* through metaphor opens the way to knowledge but also guards against the hegemony of reification by the objectivity intrinsic to critical discourse. We might paraphrase the metaphor in order to “tease out” its meanings, like William Empson did, thus enumerating discourses that answer the different problems of meaning we perceive there. Yet no list of problems can complete the explication of this metaphoric mystery; just as no list of aspects in the *It* can complete an analysis of another as my *Thou*. Objective knowledge remains fragmentary in the face of the mystery of self and another. And the rumours we construct to bridge these gaps are shown to be mere figments in the face of the real mystery which is our common humanity. Ben Boyd will not be granted hero-status by Webb. His presence emerges from a core of silence, from ignorance to be sure, but also from the fits and starts, the lightning bolt contingency of truth itself, just as the characters who speak also do.

The arrival of Ben Boyd’s yacht *The Wanderer* emphasizes the gap between existence and word, possibly an essential lacuna within the experience of all written discourse, especially when the personal voice has been silenced. The words Webb uses to describe this event are terse and to the point:

1842. An immense shaking of the sun
On the little flat waves of the harbour,
And a young town grown from myths at the world’s end
Where the south is a swaggering fantasy, not yet sober.²⁵

The signs in the sun – “broad as a weft,” Coleridge wrote in the earliest version of the *Ancient Mariner* (1798) – send a prophecy of impending developments, the air charged with expectation, for the inhabitants of the sleepy port. There is a certain unreality in this place. Webb captures the hallmarks of a town built on promises rather than concrete eventualities (on

²⁴ Andrew Lynch (2001) “Francis Webb’s White Swan of Trespass”: 35.

²⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 60.

possibility without *necessity*, in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and, therefore, in *despair*).

One glimpses in the “swaggering fantasy, not yet sober,” a vision of frontiersmen on the far-flung limits of empire basking in the indolence of an alcoholic haze, unable to grasp the fallibility of their own sober reality. The poet mirrors the Ancient Mariner when he wrote: “we barter /Our grey albatross and rearing tonnage of swirl /For a leaning shore, land birds, an officious cutter.” The mariners exchange the dangers of a life at sea for a disappointing refuge within the confines of a safe harbour. We are left in no doubt about the seediness of this town and the threadbare decay of its citizens as the shining white boat bearing Boyd docks in the harbour:

The *Wanderer*, swaying like a mirage
Of snow country, drifts in safely;
While all the paunchy loafers near the dockside
Gape at an apparition so wholly lovely,

Plumaged with softness, yet diamond-beaked
With purposeful bowsprits of destiny.²⁶

In the gaps of the record, legends feed the rumour mill from the need to grant to a scene a majesty that it might not have had in order to describe the advent of a new order. A boat sails into the harbour of a decaying frontier town, unannounced, bearing a man whose will, for a short time, alters the destiny of this sleepy port. But Webb questions the Nietzschean tendencies of his contemporaries to adulate the heroic solitary, the *Übermensch*, denouncing the mediocre “herd.” Ayn Rand’s crass caricature of Frank Lloyd Wright, “Howard Roark”, has no place beside Webb’s anti-portrait of Ben Boyd. On the contrary, the “paunchy loafers,” not given to huge flights of fancy, yet bound to their station by the “swaggering fantasy” of the south, are still able to appreciate the beauty of Boyd’s ship. Webb is never wholly unsympathetic to these ingrates and layabouts. From the cynicism of “Our Roving Reporter”, who illustrates as clear a vision of what Kierkegaard called an *aesthete* as any from Kierkegaard’s own pen – perhaps a satire on his

²⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 60.

mentors in the Norman Lindsay set then dominating the Australian literary scene – to John Webster, captain of *The Wanderer*, the poet assumes the voices of the common people living in the shadow of Boyd, often with a quiet if retrograde dignity. Their limitations are our limitations. Webb gently mocks the heroic hyperbole attached by popular culture to such events:

Trumpets and adulation here take over,
The original impact and dream rest with the sea.²⁷

Whatever panegyric we might prefer for our heroes, the fallibility of the witnesses will provide us with a very different kind of poetry. Here the common people are entrusted with the story of Boyd. Webb wrote in *Images in Winter*, apparently at the suggestion of fellow poet Douglas Stewart:²⁸ “There were no ‘hollow men’ who saw with me,”²⁹ a sentiment to which the poet would remain true in all his poetry, even when the hollow men seem most palpable.

What took hold in their society, however, was not the presence of Boyd but the effigies of gossip, raised like banners over the *name* of the man. We are far from certain what sort of man he is:

Ringed with a million sterling, the name of Boyd
Shuffles the horizon like some monstrous hand
Spanning the island, idly pulling strings of trade,
Half-cynically toying with rumours of banks and land.³⁰

The “monster grows in gossip,” we can neither free the image of Boyd from the matrix of people’s craving nor from the *ring* of his millions. “Eyes like huge cartwheels turning in jealous flame.”³¹ They do not know (nor do we) whether this larger than life-size character, bursting upon the quiet, sleepy town like a storm, has in truth greatness, simply toys with the commonfolk or is merely a confidence trickster gulling the crowd. Their uncertainty breeds discontent and

²⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 60.

²⁸ Andrew Lynch. (2001) “Francis Webb’s White Swan of Trespass”: 32.

²⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 21.

³⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 62.

³¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 62.

gossip and rumour. In the face of the audacity and wealth of Boyd, our humble ambitions seem petty, uneventful:

We who know small ambitions are yet pliant,
Turning like creeks to avoid each obstinate feature
That reason jams in our way – but this is a giant
Rolling boulders aside, and daring nature.³²

The society artist Sir Oswald Brierly, he who “grew colourless, left no self-portrait,”³³ attempts to take the place of the absent in the amnesia of history. He sought to avoid a “foothold in common thought,” with the aloofness of an aristocrat; an artist struggling to realize his vision in paint, yet never encountering the essence of what he painted. Each of the warring elements on the canvas, held in dynamic balance by the artist’s brush: “The fratricidal shock of elements /Natural to each other.” And of these elements, Ben Boyd is but one: “No more human than the air we breathe /Yet it brings life.”³⁴

He likens Boyd to the sea-battered coastal cliffs, and like the cliffs, charged with awe and fascination.³⁵ In them “you see yourself /Enlarged” by forces in which “you feel ominous currents/ Dragging you away from humanity.” Yet, it is a profoundly narcissistic conception. Standing aside from life, noting the fading effects of Boyd as “his town falls, stone by stone,” the artist notes the gossip around the “sluggish wharves” always of Boyd’s romantic death:

A duel across a table in California,
A slow starvation in a derelict yacht,
A lonely struggle on some cannibal island,
Always the tale brings death.³⁶

With neither sympathy nor fellow-feeling, the artist stays his hand from his painting. Yet here too, there is something missing. A sense of loss pervades his artwork. He mostly paints from memory, dining on ashes similar to the gossips in the port. He paints landscapes, the port

³² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 62-3.

³³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 63.

³⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 63.

³⁵ Andrew Lynch (2001) “Francis Webb’s White Swan of Trespass”: 37-8.

³⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 64.

crowded with whaling-ships, “but all at anchor, /And rarely venture out beyond the shoreline.”³⁷

His sense of loss reflects the absence that is Boyd, yet he is unwilling to venture beyond the safety of memory, beyond the borderline of his monologue and, therefore, he fails to enter into the vital dialogue that his art might have granted him. “Something in my brain is atrophied, fallen away, /And this, I suppose you could say, is Boyd or something about him.” He differs little from all the other common folk who resented Boyd but never found a way to see anything but the projection of their own fears or desires.

Identity and despair

Another aesthete, the Politician, displays the cunning that keeps a person like this in office. He too judges Boyd by appearances alone. He marks him as a “leader,” yet damns him with faint praise. Ultimately, the Politician is only interested in himself, shielding himself from criticism behind formality, while appearing to stand beside the man of action. He too is bound into the despairing solipsism of his monologue:

He comes of good stock and will prove valuable
As a check to our rather crude, undisciplined peasantry.³⁸

The Politician identifies himself with the common people here when he employs the “our” as a rhetorical flourish. In this he is like the knights of Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, hollow men presenting themselves as true benefactors of the state, while finding the image of “power and tradition” in Boyd both attractive and worrying. The Politician’s admiration is not merely conventional but his judgments consist of moralistic cliché:

For his toil among the poor, benighted heathen,
Teaching them hard work with a most Christian savour
I have nothing but praise.³⁹

Nowhere do the actions of Boyd in brutally kidnapping and enslaving the Papuans even prick the Politician’s conscience except as patriarchal enforcement of so-called civilized virtues

³⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 64.

³⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 67.

³⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 67.

of hard labour upon its unwilling recipients, the “poor, benighted heathen.” Indeed, after painting a picture of “Christian” virtue, the Politician turns a blind eye to the rumour of illicit and riotous behaviour of the white population in Boyd’s town: “We all know that whalers are most godless creatures.” He ducks for cover, unwilling to face these contradictions. He renders himself unaccountable by assuming the politician’s mask, the mask of his refuge:

For the rest – I am old, and can always claim the privilege
Of office and respect and retreat a little
Behind formality when I am hurried unduly.⁴⁰

While the Politician holds himself aloof from his society, the Boat Builder holds himself with dignity against the epics of desire by proudly steeping himself in the conventional niceties of gentile society:

I, Jan Strindberg, boat-builder from Vossvangen,
Came to this colony through strife and hunger,
Forsaking my life work, leaving epics behind me.⁴¹

He views Boyd’s ship with antagonism. There are some men, many people, who choose a conservative life of peace, a quiet life, a refuge from excitement and novelty but also from pain. The Ancient Mariner gazed enviously upon the village inhabitants going to the Kirk in goodly company. Similarly, the Boat Builder has lived through suffering and he regarded the adventurer before him with the suspicion of those whose refuge is threatened:

Burning for one fierce second, protagonist
Of a world tangled in flame, despair and darkness,
I saw the *Wanderer* glide in, knew it was gliding
Into my last defenceless anchorage.⁴²

There is despair in the Boat Builder’s words; a man afraid of life itself, living in his “backwater of life, in my declension.” “Declension” reflects a willed state of decline or moral deterioration (*OED*) into which the Boat Builder stakes his claim, the defences he has built for

⁴⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 67.

⁴¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 60.

⁴² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 61.

himself. I have said that Webb treats the common people with sympathy and so it is with respect to the Boat Builder. But he does not present even this dignified opponent of life as a paragon of human authenticity. There is too much fear and despair in him to fully command our respect:

No ripple foreshadowed a remorseless entry,
No warning gun snapped at those pallid bows,
Death came upon me, strangling peace and reason,
And his grey, swollen trappings people my heart.⁴³

The Boat Builder's fear reflects the despair deep in his own heart. That is, in his despair we catch the face of Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death," the true face of despair. Far from seeing the boat simply as a boat, the Boat Builder reacts to its intrusion as one still entrapped by the epic myths of his past. Fleeing despair returns one to the despair from which one fled. He might renounce epically inspired, apocalyptic experience⁴⁴ – "I have chosen bread for dreams, the hearth-place for action,/ Safety for courage, shutters and candles for stars," – but he witnesses the arrival of the ship into his place of exile as an assault of dark satanic forces, forces of pandemonium and disorder.

Dark Lord of the waters – you of the wind-belled mantle,
Lord beyond Fate – what have you killed this day?
A ship or two in an hour, some few fools
Drowned or starved, and few gulls choked with squall?⁴⁵

This dark, satanic power bears the attributes of Poseidon, trident-wielding god "who moves the earth and the desolate sea,"⁴⁶ whose sea-quake was about to disrupt the sleepy town. The torment of the Boat Builder's despair prevents him away from meeting life when it chances upon him:

His eyes like blue stones, pitted by a plague or a vision,
The stone being lifeless, its scars eager with life.⁴⁷

⁴³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 61.

⁴⁴ Andrew Lynch (2001) "Francis Webb's White Swan of Trespass": 35.

⁴⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 61.

⁴⁶ Jules Cashford ed. (2003) *The Homeric Hymns*. XXII: 127.

⁴⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 55.

This names the double-bind of despair, the aporias so ably acknowledged by Kierkegaard's aesthete 'A' in *Either/Or*, who is incapable of escaping their deathly paradoxes. Others, including "Our Roving Reporter" and the Politician, also aesthetes in this same sense, are even further from acknowledging their own despair than the elderly Norwegian boatshed-owner. But whether one brushes off the means of encountering and transcending one's despair, as Our Roving Reporter, or hides from it in fear and depression, as the Boat Builder, the result is the same: life passes those unwilling to step up to it and meet it face to face. We are told the Boat Builder did not see Ben Boyd, only his yacht's arrival. Yet Jan Strindberg has woven such epics of fear that he must hide himself in featureless routine, unwilling to step boldly forward to meet the man and see him for what he is, another mortal sharing this earth. The heroic dimension serves both to enlarge the Boat Builder and to protect him from the disorder his story brings. The heroic, epic dimension in the Boat Builder also serves to magnify Ben Boyd into a demonic presence not matched by reality. Other characters succumb to similar fears.

The Journalist, on the other hand, presents his "admiration" in true journalese fashion while secretly envying the man before him, his status, his fortune, his future. Like the Boat Builder, we garner no hope of his truly encountering the man before him. He weaves his news-story with glib confidence, rolling out the standard phrases of his profession:

The owner's good copy: 'Of illustrious family,
Descendant of' – some laird of something or other,
'Of princely means', damn him.⁴⁸

As reporter and envier, the Journalist, like those before him, fails to behold the man as he is and respond to his challenge. While fulfilling the newspaper-owner's desire for "good copy," the Journalist will stumble at the threshold. He, who could have reached out to the man and to us, his readership, loses sight of his real responsibility to disclose the truth and recourses to hackneyed cliché. He too is hiding from life, taking refuge in his despair:

With those eyes like talons, that blackguard confidence,

⁴⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 62.

He'll grind out a fortune, rule this blasted colony
While I sit here rotting slowly between editions.⁴⁹

It is important to note how the witnesses to the drama reveal more of their own despair than they do of Ben Boyd himself. He has not been granted a personal voice in history and therefore, he stays distanced from other people. He is the protagonist, yes, but locked into being the perpetual other. Our witnesses only understand him through the gridlines of their own failings, concerned more with themselves than with true encounter. Maintaining what Martin Buber dubbed “monologue,” their potential for dialogue collapses. The poet raises these portraits of despair, such that we are confronted with our own fears, our own despair and our own failure to meet life.

One of Boyd's employees, a whaler, full of spite towards his boss – “A dressed-up ape with a patronising stick,”⁵⁰ – and to the blacks, his shipmates, eventually grants grudging respect after spitting malice at them. Yet the opportunities opened to him by both Boyd and the blacks, told to us in a lyric of profound beauty, is of greater value than anything the artist Oswald Brierly can grasp:

When dirty air's in my mouth and everyone's yapping
I think of the water, lonely and asking nothing,
With no whales inspecting you through a monocle,
And a clean wind, not stained with rotten cabbages.
I think of the grey rain smothering our lights,
Of the sun rattling through black and silver foam,
Of the chase with my hands blistering on the sweep,
Of the butting squalls, and the days of green quietness.⁵¹

In that memory of his joy, the Whaler's loss is tangible. Without Ben Boyd to crack the whip, nothing will happen; the whaling days are gone and like the artist, the Whaler now no longer ventures out past the shoreline. Out there lays his despair, patent and pitiable. After contemplating the lyric memory, his only outlet is “to get drunk and frighten a policeman” for

⁴⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 62.

⁵⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 64.

⁵¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 65.

sport. Yet we are left with the suspicion that the Whaler's despair is as much self-imposed as it is a product of circumstance. He is as arrogant to those beneath him on the social scale as he perceived Ben Boyd was to him – "Pointing you out to his friends as a sound machine /Capable of so many tricks when fed on threepence" – the Whaler understands himself as a "machine" a cog in the apparatus of industry and he projects his resentment onto Boyd just as he himself enforces power over the unfortunates under his charge. But Webb does not present us with such a two-dimensional portrait of this common man. The poet describes the intrinsic lyricism of the Whaler shining through the carapace of projected fear, spite and prejudice. The Whaler did not suffer from the same histrionic nihilism as the society-artist, Sir Oswald Brierly, who, it seems, rarely left his studio. Nevertheless, the walls of their prison account for much of their despair.

Power and alienation

A commentary on Boyd's power regime and its social implications can be sought in the tale of the Papuan Shepherd. It is noticeable that "Our Roving Reporter" excluded the Papuan shepherd from his list of interviewees. The most exploited were those stolen from their country, their communities and robbed of their liberty by private venturers given official sanction, like Boyd. The Papuan shepherd speaks for all those violently abducted from their country by speaking from the attitude of community:

Some of us trembled and clapped hands slowly in fear,
While others fingered their spears and stones in doubt;
But when the flame sprang, and spirits squeaked overhead
And an incredible thunder troubled the trees,
We crouched in terror lest our sky drip blood.⁵²

The Papuans are dragged aboard the white-men's ship "to impure burial /In the bellies of their tamed monsters." To the horrified Papuans, this was an act of desecration as the holy order of Nature herself was defiled:

So we saw
Our gods fall back defeated to the green lands

⁵² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 65.

Fading into mist, leaving us to struggle
With rages and subtleties that no one understands.⁵³

The community from which the shepherd was so brutally torn stands in stark contrast to the whaling town bankrolled by Boyd: “Boydtown”. Living in a state of grace with nature, the Papuan community manifests an intrinsic participation in the natural theology that underpins most of Webb’s work. The godless ships and denizens of Boydtown, on the other hand, are the antithesis of the Papuan community. Boyd, who created the town in his own image, can therefore legitimately be represented by the Papuan shepherd in his state of desolation.

The shepherd loses his gods and the identity he once had within the common ‘We’ that is authentic community. What replaces it is alienation, abandonment to an isolated struggle with nihilism in his servitude in a strange land devoid of any connection to the spiritual landscape into which he was born:

Out in these bare places a poison wrings
Power from my arms; each new night spits ice,
And I am forgetting the songs and the careless fishing
The old fighting and the old peace.⁵⁴

Only until this moment does the Papuan Shepherd speak of himself as an “I”, his isolation a mirror of the desolation in the lives of the population of Boydtown. Webb realizes a prescient vision in his thought about native peoples and their connection with community and country. The contrast between these meaningful relations and the Papuan’s final desolation could not be starker. In his alienation and nihilism, the Papuan Shepherd shares in the social system that enslaved him and it is revealed through him to be constituted of isolated and alienated individuals from top to bottom. Even in memory, the past slips from his hold; he has become displaced from his own people, his own life, and his own land. He is precisely and perpetually *dislocated*. This also describes Ben Boyd and the whole hopeless edifice of Boydtown. The conception of *displacement* is one of the “recuperative strategies” used by Webb identified by a

⁵³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 65.

⁵⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 66.

post-colonial reading of his work.⁵⁵ What is missed by such post-colonial readings is the sense in which Webb seeks a reprieve from such nihilistic states. When we finally deal with *Ward Two*, the last chapter devoted to the poetry of Francis Webb, we will discover Webb's response to this existential dislocation will reach a spiritual apotheosis in present reality. Glorifying the past is also an avoidance of the reality before us.⁵⁶

In another untitled poem, Webb compares the artistry of Sir Oswald Brierly with Boyd and his building of Boydtown, the ill-fated whaling station. What differs between them is largely one of degree rather than kind:

Brierly dreams of a studio,
The governor's portrait, grave magisterial duties,
Of evening's wrangle with planes of assailing colour,
And trapping snaky clippers – but Boyd dreams of cities.⁵⁷

Brierly accepts the governor's conventional social standing as he paints his portrait. The artist treats the painting in a purely technical way, bringing a metaphorical death to his subject. The cities of which Boyd dreams bring death to the land, nature destroyed for it to be overlain by the tawdry clichés of empire, not even authentically British, yet they maintain the same conventional social institutions: "Of churches and pubs at decent intervals." These were cities:

Bleeding the hardy pastures with new wounds;
Of dead whales scarring the beaches; of the gulls
Haunting their epic tumbling skeletons.⁵⁸

Feeding the city's insatiable maw, the merchant ships trade down the coast, drawing everything from the hinterland to feed Boyd's desires, until even the coasts were "subdued by facade and wall." These desires manipulate the people to achieve Boyd's ambitions, like the painter manipulating the colours of his palette. But the madness and wildness of the dream must falter and fall as all power crumbles, like Shelley's *Ozymandias* or Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*.

⁵⁵ James Paull (1993) "The Thematic of History in Francis Webb's Poetry": 63.

⁵⁶ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 51.

⁵⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 66.

⁵⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 66.

Webb passes a condemning commentary upon the Nietzschean Übermensch and the fallacy within the will to power. Yet here too, we find a grudging admiration for the sheer lunacy of the enterprise:

Out of fools and incredulity
Boyd built his town, ran the whole baffling range
Of a mad whim, and, which was wilder, held it
A dizzy second before the foundering and the plunge.⁵⁹

This says Webb is a “summary of Knossos and sweep of Nineveh,” cities passed into dust and smothered beneath desert sands. Cities that succeed, the poet tells us, succeed through a “common will.” Knossos and Nineveh fell and comparing them to Boyd’s town, the poet gives us the reason why Boyd must fail: He was like the kings of those ancient cities, laying down law and power without real access to the common people. He only succeeded at first because of “fools and incredulity,” not on a solid basis of authentic community. That the poem follows hard on the heels of the Papuan Shepherd stolen from his community signifies a contrast between the two. The Papuan passes from community into deprived isolation; Boyd arrives in luxurious isolation and attempts to build a city in his own image. The contrast with Brierly is minimal compared with the person violently plucked from his authentic communal existence. Yet it seems that Ben Boyd’s vision was realized by common consent after all and by common consent it floundered:

The cities feed only on a common will;
Yet all the poetry of a tower’s ascent
Leaps out most powerfully in its rocking and fall.⁶⁰

The enormous enterprise of building a town, a kingdom and an empire, occurs on a mad whim and only lasted as long as it did because such madness is infectious. There was never going to emerge a community from merely gathering bits and pieces of a distant civilisation. It

⁵⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 66.

⁶⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 66.

will fall as did the megalomaniacal enterprise of the Tower of Babel. Something much more fundamental is called for. Boyd was never to escape from the aesthete's dilemma:

If you hang yourself, you will regret it; if you do not hang yourself, you will regret it. if you hang yourself or you do not hang yourself, you will regret both; whether you hang yourself or you do not hang yourself, you will regret both.⁶¹

This poem, the tenth in the series, is the closest we'll get to Ben Boyd. But the portrait is one of hopelessness, a fragment grasping only the man's desire to institute a city and not constitute himself as a person. That is the flawed civic face of Boyd, not the private and personal human being. All the poems that might have identified the real figure of Boyd bear no titles, symbolising the ultimate silence that attends the figure who does not speak for himself. He is represented as being the same as the painter manipulating his paint, not different in kind but different only in extent. The aesthete's capacity reaches extreme lengths but he stamps his image upon all his enterprises, as hollow as he is.

Another witness of Boyd's impact upon the land and its people is the Pioneer of the Monaro. What is placed at risk by Boyd's intercession into this land is the Pioneer's deep and personal relation to the land, to the very earth itself. How can the peripatetic entrepreneur ever comprehend or be comprehended by someone who holds such a close personal relationship?

I have loved two things deeply: the earth and silence,
Two giant bulks furrowed by cold harmony,
Petrified rhythms, with eternal rhythmic challenge.⁶²

This is the conflict between the pastoralist and the industrialist, between the solitary's relation to land and a city businessman creating the city in his own image. One becoming one with the land, all static and conservative – “If I have grown quiet as my land, remember /That to conquer mountains one must think as the mountain” – seeking only the monument of his name in

⁶¹ Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 54.

⁶² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 67.

historical memory; the other building lighthouses and “an evil town, veined with corruption and murder, /Clinging like a swollen leech to the bay’s lips,” as his monuments.

He does not love this country – why come here
Trampling my peace, trampling my very life?
He holds all the cards – even time is with him,
Time, lover of anything gaudy, hollow, rotten.⁶³

The notion of monuments in time does not merely serve to contrast the two men. It marks, on the one hand, the perceived self-centred materialism of one man, granted a free-hand above any law, and the supposed earth-centred ethic of the other. Boyd’s achievements seem solidly circumscribed by time itself; he bears the appearance of the aesthete including the aesthete’s temporal entrapment. The Pioneer likes to think he transcends the world of appearances by grasping the eternal in nature. Webb’s natural theology quietly threads its way through the Pioneer’s conceptions of the eternal. This is also very close to Kierkegaard’s “ethical stage”. So while the Pioneer sees “Time and a legend stealing my name from the earth,” he has already passed into the eternality of the land as an unnamed “Pioneer,” his “being will gutter and dissolve” into the very ground of all being.

Yet ultimately the Pioneer is as self-centred as his appraisal of Boyd. It is not the peace of the land that has been disturbed but his peace and the land he inhabits is located neither on the coast nor the desert in the centre but on the threshold to both, not one nor the other. It is his refuge that is disturbed. He is very like the Boat Builder in this regard. And like the Boat Builder it is his fear that magnifies Boyd into a demonic presence. So close to the land that he identifies with it, he fails to comprehend Boyd for the man that he is. And should we also ask, as a Pioneer of the Monaro, what happened to the original inhabitants of the land that he calls his own now? Maybe he and Boyd are not so different.

⁶³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 68.

The death of Boyd

The downfall of Boyd's enterprises quickly follows. Time reaches a cusp between the present, made "null and void" and the "dark perspective" of the future. There is a moment of ascendancy, followed by a sudden collapse when reality intrudes into the fantasy spun both by Boyd and all those who threw their lot in with him in making this enterprise possible.

After the groups at corners, the upraised fist,
The perennial bewilderment of the suddenly unemployed,
Comes uncertainty: a pause for the reefing and twist
Of new events and patterns in the dark perspective
Of future – a time when the present is null and void.⁶⁴

But what did the success and failure of Boyd's whim mean to the man himself at the heart of his life?

And the man on the bridge of his own self-scuttled wreck?
You cannot picture him broken or prostrate;
Success was the terror that might have tensed his back
To an unnatural arc, turned him away, out-patient,
Healed, and thoroughly dead to his right mind and fate.⁶⁵

What does Webb mean by "self-scuttled wreck"? Boyd was implicated in the failure of the mad enterprise as if willing it, intent perhaps on regaining his peripatetic journey with nothing but a passing interest in the many people his enterprise had reduced to ruin.

The lacuna of Boyd is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand, it tells us that a person cannot be captured by another's testimony when that testimony does not register anything else but its own monologue. Boyd's image is but a mere effigy erected by the narcissism of each character. Of Boyd himself we learn very little. On the other hand, we find in the lacuna where the man should be, a gap that tells us this man cannot connect with the people around him. He passes through but hides behind a carapace of wealth and image, sparking rumours that whet the people's appetite for a part of that wealth. Setting himself up as the bringer of civilisation to the

⁶⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 68.

⁶⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 68.

“heathen,” he also engages in stealing and enslaving the unfortunate Papuans. He wears a coat of Christian virtue, while building a town of vice and murder, housing the “godless” Whalers, who carry out these atrocities against the Papuans. The monuments of his benefaction are but edifices erected to increase his wealth at the expense of other merchants. And as the Pioneer says: “He does not love this country.” The lacuna that is Boyd portrays that which is “gaudy, hollow, rotten”; a bankrupt aesthete. And yet, given that all the other characters are bankrupt and aesthetes in their own way, are we really surprised this is the impression with which we are left of Boyd? Does this not really tell us that Boyd was just another fallible human being, not the demon monster, a product of the desire and fear projected onto him?

Ben Boyd arrived with a satirical “fanfare”. He slips away unheralded, once the crisis has ceased to keep him in port. Webb denies to his subject the usual accolades of the ‘man of action’, the ‘man of vision’; not the fabled hero, not even the tragic hero:

There were no ghosts, no phantom, cheering crowds,
No flapping of the air with guns from an anchored schooner.⁶⁶

Already Boyd is seeking new conquests, though the journey out onto the oceans might bring him peace for a moment. But that peace is an illusion. His temporality will not bring him serenity; he must strive forward without release from the desires of the next moment, rather like the Ancient Mariner, he is fated to pass from land to land:

The fallen gentleman now feels the only peace
Possible to flame-like hearts: the piling up
Of driftwood, new fuel of enterprise.⁶⁷

Hard upon his heels the rumour-mill rolls on, turning out new myths, vague remembrances of possibility without the cut and dried shape of reality to hold them down. Those who hardly knew him are left with nothing but rumour.

Now for his friends is the time of dusk and rumour,
Echoes picked up in the wind and whirled about,

⁶⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 69.

⁶⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 69.

Talk of gold, talk of a raging dreamer,
Gun-duels, silence.

But rumours, like smoke from a distant fire, bear a lasting sign of the vitalist nihilism in the Nietzschean *Übermensch* floating so high above the normal, which, if it is to be valued, needs to find a place within everyday life. Webb's sympathy will always be with the common man, among whom he clearly felt comfortable. The aristocratic elite, espoused by Eliot, while it held some fascination for Webb, did not convince him in the long run. If Boyd appears to us to have a certain ambiguity in Webb's poetic sequence, it is because the man stands apart from everybody including the elite of the colony. Webb's treatment of Boyd as the lacuna at the heart of his sequence, extricates the man from the poetic adulation of the panegyric, keeping him as a presence in the lyrical sense, unbidden by false tribute or scorn.

The last two poems of the cycle speak of events that followed Boyd's departure from Twofold Bay, the absurd expedition to recover his remains from the island where he disappeared and an eyewitness account of Boyd's final disappearance into the greenery of a tropical island.

The head of the expedition to recover Boyd's remains, the Captain of the *Oberon*, holds the reputed skull of Boyd in his hands to solve the riddle of Boyd's disappearance. Later tests on the skull revealed that it wasn't Boyd but a native of the island.⁶⁸ Even the much-desired physical remains of Boyd are absent. The poem parodies the famous soliloquy of *Hamlet* as the young hero holds the skull of Yorrick in his hands: "I had never before held death, pale and polished, in my hands, /Nor dreamed it so round and empty and motionless..."⁶⁹ Certainly Webb implies how like the jester, Boyd appears to be, revealing the folly in men's lives, whether the Captain of the *Oberon* or the fools pressed into Boyd's service in his town of vice and infamy. The lacuna that is Boyd assumes the "little, obscure way" of *Cap and Bells*, the way of the jester, who is given leave by the powers to mock even kings.⁷⁰ His laughter rebounds on those who laugh, just as Boyd's presence rebounds upon all the people who loiter in his life. From the

⁶⁸ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 128.

⁶⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 69.

⁷⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 17.

journey of Boyd through the history of the region, we have gained not a vision of Boyd but of the people themselves. He held a mirror up to the inhabitants to see reflected back an image of themselves and their own folly. Even resentment about his “stolen name” reveals the Pioneer’s desire to be remembered for all time.

The folly of this enterprise rebounds on the Captain. He took the job because it seemed romantic and monetarily worthwhile, especially should his search prove successful. “And I’ll admit,” says the Captain, “that the man intrigued me, /A fairytale customer with a trick of vanishing, /Leaving a score of yarns.” “But,” he boasts, “I could fool him /With a Government charter behind me to track him down /If alive, or ransom his bones.”⁷¹ By tracking him down, finding the skull, they felt they could uncover all the answers to the enigma of the man; to fill the lacuna at the centre of the drum. Yet when the Captain achieves his objective, the truth of Boyd seems further away than ever. The skull is empty and like the lacuna of Webb’s poem, it fails to yield anything of Boyd. We feel that even in Boyd’s absence, he is having the last laugh:

Something over my shoulder keeps repeating
That this in my hands is a guess or maybe a lie.⁷²

The journey undertaken by the Captain is anything but romantic: “The usual dull slog through the islands with the sky quivering, /Gasping for air, the water oily and steaming, /And a pillar of squall moving here and there.” And after a difficult negotiation with the “local savages” of Guadalcanal, they finally retrieve what they presume to be Boyd’s “small grey skull/ Streaked in places by green lines of fungus.” Nothing is resolved about Boyd; he slips from their grasp, mocking their folly, his visage growing even larger in the fables they spin:

As I said before, he has the laugh on me,
Leans over my shoulder, mocking the thing I clutch
And poise and balance. Dead men have the power
To mock us even while we juggle their actual bones;
They have slipped clean out of illusion, and they grow –
Six feet when he died – this fellow would top a cloud!⁷³

⁷¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 69

⁷² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 70.

Inevitably, the images that are thrown back at them from the mirror of Boyd are the many fragments of their own projections. From the totality of testimony of all these characters, what we ultimately see is not a portrait of Boyd but projections from the characters themselves. What we gain, therefore, is not the man but a shadow of our many projections. Here, the word ‘projection’ relates to Carl Jung’s notion of the ‘Shadow’.⁷⁴ Boyd emerges as the shadow projection of what each character *believes* he *is not*. Boyd thus is viewed through this darkening prism as the opposite, the antithetical other, their dialectical negative. Yet the projection is shown by Webb to be both an illusion and revelatory of the speaker’s true self, their fears and their desires. Accordingly, we understand what the jester is mocking.

The last person we meet, who might shed some light upon the enigma of Ben Boyd, throws us some relief by admitting his own fallibilities. These might be the ramblings of an old man, he warns us. But in amongst all apparent madness, John Webster strikes us with his sober reflections: “I am growing old; my eyesight trembles badly, /So facts of the past are my only speculation.” That should alert us to the unreliability of this last attempted portrait. Webster speaks of how Boyd increasingly lost touch with reality. The truth of Boyd slips further away from our grasp:

Perhaps I foresaw the future of the last voyage,
Boyd’s schemes losing touch with realism,
Hands flickering and nervous, eyes baffled;
Though, when the gold-rush struck on a barren core
And his search was just another giant failure,
He didn’t care twopence, positively seemed to rely
On a chain of failures – God alone knew his ambitions.⁷⁵

Webster’s cloud of uncertainty casts a veil of authenticity on his pronouncements on Boyd, even on himself at that distant time. Yet they are simply speculations:

Perhaps, though he talked with the usual gust and force,

⁷³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 70.

⁷⁴ Carl G. Jung (1968) *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*: 8-10.

⁷⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 70.

He realized well that this scheme of island republics
Appeared to his friends and his foes and himself as a sign,
As the first cairn on a final road to madness.⁷⁶

Webster paints a portrait of this strange quixotic man engaging in fantastic schemes that depart more and more from reality. In the lyrical description of their leaving San Francisco, the landscape of “glittering house fronts and those coal-blue hills/ Dropping in rigid folds out of the sky,” is peppered with “windmills slowly turning over.” The sense we gain of poetic signs on the landscape, announced by the reference to the ‘black sail’, suggests a poetic grasp of Ben Boyd as *Don Quixote*, another jester holding a mirror to the follies of society. This sense is heightened by the dream-spinning, fantastical shapes that seduce unwitting spectators, like the bemused Sancho Panza. But like the growing awareness of Don Quixote, Boyd seems to be gaining a new realization of himself; a self-image tinged with irony. We might not comprehend the man but there is evidence that he began to comprehend himself:

But more often came this new weapon of irony
Turned in against himself, something was shifting
And breaking up, some power that had held his eyes
Turned outward only.⁷⁷

The more outlandish his enterprises, the more self-aware he becomes. It is perhaps a measure of the extent to which self-knowledge can reveal the abilities of the imagination. But of that final day, “his last desperate day,” John Webster has difficulty in unifying all the impressions: “All’s torn and arrested.” But starting from a “blank matrix” he is able to give these snatches of memory a coherence that might or might not be true:

A dark upflung arm hangs suspended, glistening,
A thrown spear, whistling in its arc like a comet,
Bristles with knots of flame and points and violence;
An eyeball glares like a sovereign by candlelight;
Or a fired canoe eddies, and its prow snaps upward
Like the jaws of a transfixed shark.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 71.

⁷⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 71.

The imagination gives way to a more straightforward description of the final moments of Boyd. Yet it is an epitaph to the enigma of the man himself:

Boyd that morning started off alone
With a cheerful warning to all game within gunshot;
His blurred shape grappled with the outskirts of the unknown,
I saw him pause a long moment, like a swimmer
Before the plunge into green, opaque density.
Would not that have pleased him? (unpredictable,
As he called himself, not to be tied down)⁷⁹

The line “His blurred shape grappled with the outskirts of the unknown” sums up Webb’s treatment of his unpredictable, peripatetic central enigma throughout the poetic sequence. It was important for the man to dictate his death as he had dictated his life, unrepentant but also known only to himself. One gets the impression that the final voyage was merely the impossible dream that would deliver the man up to death. He strides forward into oblivion, still distant, still an enigma, still the subject of conjecture and rumour, still in cheerful command of his fate:

That his final appearance was not as the half-corpse
In tangible bedclothes with an odour of crepe and tears,
But as a shadow at the distant end
Of a tunnel of sunlight; for his last office
A couple of shots rapped out like sharp commands;

And a moment’s peace over the whole island.⁸⁰

The poetic cycle is a “drum for Ben Boyd” if it is a circle that returns us to the beginning and the first poem in the sequence. Bill Ashcroft wrote:

The “Author’s Prologue” in this poem sequence is the most important section because the message of “A Drum For Ben Boyd” is that whoever Ben Boyd really was, the *process* of plunging through the limitations of human existence, such as memory, in order to find the truth of being, is the real adventure and task of art.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 71

⁷⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 71-2.

⁸⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 72.

⁸¹ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 13.

The limits of epistemology founder upon this fundamental borderline of death, beyond which it is impossible to go. Ben Boyd thus stands for the temporal dimensions of a life, bounded in time by birth and death, and subject to the fallibilities of memory. In focusing upon the lineaments of fallible memory, not to bridge it with false bravura but to navigate as faithfully as he could the absences of faltering recollection, Webb released his central figure from the impulse to circumscribe existence within the nets of our fears and desires. The mystery of Boyd is the mystery in us and the lacuna at the heart of “A Drum for Ben Boyd” points in its silence to the mystery that is a human being.

The awesomeness of the task of depicting Ben Boyd began to reveal to the poet some of the heroic capacities of the artist’s own solitary journey. The historical truth he seeks is the paradigm of that truth which recurs in the poetry, symbolised by the “Centre”, by the notion of Being. But this first struggle with the vagueness indeterminacy and arbitrariness of truth within time and human memory outlines the nature of the struggle the poetry will have with these concepts.⁸²

Webb comes to accept the indeterminacy of memory through the final testimonial of John Webster. This man seems closest to the heart of the conundrum but he confirms the unreliability of his memory, unable to form a complete picture even of Boyd’s last day, let alone the mystery of his being. Boyd will remain an enigma, perhaps not quite known even to himself, a projection as much of his own fears and desires. The power of words to judge and circumscribe is thus concretely and firmly denied by the poet. There is here a mature resolution of the problem of this human enigma by letting the person inhabit silence’s freedom. To quote Jacob Bronowski from a different but sympathetic context, this is “what we can know *although we are fallible*.”⁸³ Webb allows his ‘hero’ simply to slip out of focus and disappear into the forest of green. The word ‘green’ for Webb seems to have had a particular symbolism, rather like Dylan Thomas’s “green chapels”,⁸⁴ fulfilling his natural theology from deep inside his Catholicism. The mysterious Ben Boyd, having stepped briefly onto the world’s stage, is swallowed up in the greenery of a lush

⁸²W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 13.

⁸³Jacob Bronowski (1973) *The Ascent of Man*: 374.

⁸⁴Dylan Thomas (1988) “Poem in October” *in* *Collected Poems 1934-1953*: 88.

tropical island, becoming one with nature and with God. James Paull wrote how in the death of the central figures of his historical sequences, “the original nature of the journey itself serves to defy the chronological and panoramic certainty for which history strives.”⁸⁵

Francis Webb’s *A Drum for Ben Boyd* does not attempt to fill the gaps in our knowledge about Boyd nor create a hero from the remembered glimpses we have of the man. Grasping the central indeterminism of poetic language, the poet understood more than anyone to what this hermeneutic incompleteness pointed. His “drum” incorporated indeterminism into a symbolic synthesis that undermines colonial and national heroic fable to tell us something about the processes and susceptibilities of our own tendency to project superhuman characteristics onto a nominated “hero”. The projections of the cast of characters are our projections as we hope for and desire the eternal hero. Boyd appears in the contradictory guises of these projections. What Webb has achieved is not a typical portrait of hero or genius, neither a politically nor an ethically loaded tale, but a sympathetic portrait of human foible and folly, of memory and projection, as we attempt to reach towards that portrait which exceeds our grasp. And what exceeds our grasp most assuredly is the mystery located at the very focus of being, something beyond explanation yet about which we might affirm.

What Webb’s *A Drum for Ben Boyd* reveals to us, hides in that enigmatic core towards which all our interpretations point. That core is the mystery of its own emptiness, whether as a hollow man or the absent person, absent to the voices who speak of him. In the very centre of “The Canticle” a single poem acts as the pivot for the whole poem cycle. This poem is the voice of St. Francis speaking with affection to his Brother Ass, the donkey carrying his meagre belongings, but also a metaphor for himself. Boyd, however, does not occupy the centre of his story but remains a figure somewhere off in the distance. Being absent, he grows in stature beyond the finitude of a human being, thereby being transformed into a force of nature, a demonic presence or a manic entrepreneur. Whatever description is most just, it maintains its line

⁸⁵ James Paull (1993) “The Thematic of History in Francis Webb’s Poetry”: 63.

of sight into the enigma. The enigma continues to exert its dynamic influence across the complete poem cycle. Therein is the mystery.

Theory Chapter II

On mystery: poetic being and the meaningful

And yet, though we strain
against the deadening grip.
of daily necessity,
I sense there is this mystery:

All life is being lived.

What is living it, then?
Is it the things themselves,
or something waiting inside them,
like an unplayed melody in a flute?

– Rainer Maria Rilke¹

Poetic indeterminacy entails interpretative incompleteness properly so-called. This, in itself, stands for a stage beyond the polysemy much favoured by Paul Ricoeur. Plurivocity, however, represents a symptom of poetic hermeneutic incompleteness but it does not explain the nature of poetic interpretation. Poetic incompleteness devolves upon the functional plane of, say, semantics or semiotics, thus remaining strategic to their systemic values. While the principle of incompleteness is a commentary upon the functional plane and, therefore, transcends in a limited way the functional plane upon which it passes commentary, it remains upon the threshold to a dialectical transcendence. In short, incompleteness presupposes a principle beyond the system in which it is expressed. Something mysterious lies behind the hermeneutic incompleteness of a poem, a hermeneutic mystery that is also ontological. Without the formal character of poetry's intrinsic ambiguity that is incompleteness, what pertains to this question would hardly arise. However, while poetic incompleteness *points towards* the mysterious centre, nevertheless, incompleteness only brings us to its threshold. Meaning, even an incompleteness of meaning, is only a fraction of the story entailed by poetry. We have been brought by poetic incompleteness to the threshold which we will now step across in a dialectical movement to a yet more inclusive discourse on poetry.

In this chapter, I will describe the central enigma in poetry, as approached by a new dialectical level that mirrors the shape, and many of the features, of poetic incompleteness but

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke *Book of Hours*: 167.

also transcends it, and towards which incompleteness points, as a “mystery”, existential in nature and relevant to our *sense of being a being*, to an existential expression of personal ontology. Mystery was described by French existentialist Gabriel Marcel in terms that reflect both a Gödelian structure and that essence of being which was certainly hinted at by Gödel but, nonetheless, remained undisclosed by his systemic description. Marcel’s concept shows an obvious correlation with formal incompleteness but offers, instead, a description of that which transcends the systemic values intrinsic to incompleteness. It was Northrop Frye, however, who first identified mystery in poetry. Indeed, he bears a surprising, if partial, comparison with Marcel. Yet Frye was unable to take full advantage of his discovery probably because he had no access to Marcel’s groundbreaking paper. Much of what follows in ensuing chapters results from the mystery within poetry. Again I commence with William Empson because he sought that which was an immediate, intuitive experience of a poem prior to the incursion of any critical analysis. Yet his emphasis upon the linear dimension of semantics meant he could not formalize his intuition or conceive of its existential possibilities.

Beauty and the meaningful

William Empson appealed to the traditional idea of “beauty”, seeing in this conventional idea a primary datum relating intimately to what I have called poetic incompleteness. In the preface to the second edition of the *Seven Types*, he discussed his reaction to a certain poem: He was not sure why the poem was “beautiful” or that he had even reacted to it correctly. Nor did he know what constituted his reaction. Perhaps if he teased out all its possible meanings he might be able to explain his feelings to himself. Yet, once he had teased out many of its interpretations, he found them far too complex to grasp in a single glance, as it were. They could only be comprehended by listing one from another in sequence, each describing a possible alternative reaction to the work. There is no doubt, he said, that some readers only grasped a small part of the “full intention.”²

² William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 10-11.

Empson's experience did not rest solely on his recognition of poetic complexity but included an intuition of a core human experience intriguingly linked to a poem's overarching density. A fully aware reader, he said, grasps a poem "as if in one glance," without needing to distinguish between its many separate interpretations from "going through the unnecessary critical exercise."³ Empson thought beauty to be congruent with everyday judgment: Our minds, he explained, operate in this way. We often understand a situation as a whole in a *practical* way. Yet, in order to arraign the situation open to critical judgement, we would have to differentiate all its constituent elements. Seeing things as a whole is a native-born ability of our minds and is particularly usual and important in our language and ordinary, everyday speech.⁴

There is another dimension in reading a poem which, when subject to critical analysis, produces the never-ending interpretation that is its hermeneutical incompleteness. Although data emerges in a poem's meaning, the reader is looking to transcend meaning in this narrow sense to grasp that which is "meaningful" in the poem – what Empson denoted by its "beauty". We know that a work is meaningful *before* we disengage meanings from it. The *meaningful*, as distinct from its *meaning*, necessitates a qualitatively different conception of a poem, because a poem can only be *meaningful to a person*. A poem touches upon the person in a meaningful way where critical discourse mostly leaves us unmoved. Indeed, all reference to the personal is stripped from critical discourse altogether as part of its qualification and clarity project. Anything pertaining to the personal fails the critical project of universality. Poetry, on the other hand, challenges our whole personal being to respond, grasping our visceral and existential being conveyed on a wholly different plane from the mere enumeration of meaning. We, its readers, are challenged to question our ground of existence, to call forth our own *sense of being* to meet the poem's (and, by inference, the poet's) sense of being. Rarely, if ever, does critical discourse achieve anything like this degree of personal involvement, whereas it is the primary datum for adjudging poetry. Like Hegel's concept of the primary intuition and its translation into an

³ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 11.

⁴ William Empson (1961) *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: 11.

abstraction,⁵ enumerating meanings of a poem *negates* the intuition of its meaningful “beauty” towards which they point.

We noted the integrity of a poem in the face of its plurality of interpretation. We do not turn away from any of these meanings, were they to make themselves apparent. Yet a common feature of our poetic experience is the *sense of being* seemingly independent of its enumerated significations. However, its ever-present problematic – a challenge to critical hermeneutics – certainly has an important bearing on the question at hand. We neither ignore poetic incompleteness, either as a concept or as an effect, nor deny its necessity. Poetic incompleteness itself *points towards* a core value of the “meaningful” that cannot be framed as a meaning amongst other meanings. Incompleteness bears the trace of that power. The source of the *meaningful* in metaphor and poem is its *mystery* properly so-called. Indeed, Marcel implies that mystery is the silent source within a world based on function that prevents that world from ringing hollow and falling into despair.⁶

Using “beauty”, Empson disclosed something of worth hidden in our relation with the poem. It is the poem which is beautiful. But Empson’s thought hinges on the immediacy of grasping beauty. Beauty will be grasped all at once. That suggests beauty will be pre-hermeneutical – something altogether immediate to the reader. We perceive the subtlety of Empson’s thinking here. He maintains the link between beauty and the *intuitive* grasp of all possible inferences. The beauty of the work intimates the possibility of all nascent interpretation. Certainly beauty transcends interpretative inference yet remains linked to it. Beauty, accordingly, denotes the insinuation of *meaning* by the *meaningful*. The *meaningful* precedes the derivation of *meaning*. Thus, it supplies the necessary context by which a reader interprets the poem.

A highly ambivalent term, “beauty” has been subject to uses and abuses, many inimical to poetry, such as in the so-called “beauty industry”. In his use of this conventional term, however, Empson attempted to grasp something altogether distinct from the relatively

⁵ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 18.

⁶ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “On the Ontological Mystery” *The Philosophy of Existence*: 12.

straightforward process of inferring meaning in the poem, something that points towards a *sense of being given without mediation*. Beauty, accordingly, is the grasping of a poem's central mystery. Yet the moment he fixed his attention upon beauty, it dissolved before his critical gaze and slipped from view. That too suggests beauty cannot be an *object* of experience. Though what is more present than it is? Empson's use of the term "beauty" discloses a poem's mystery.

The mystery of mystery

In his conception of "mystery", Gabriel Marcel shows remarkable affinities with Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. He describes the same infinite regress of an ever-present problematic. That others use "mystery" in exactly the same way, testifies to the unacknowledged penetration of Marcel's thought into the critical lexicon. They include diverse thinkers such as literary-critic Northrop Frye, theologian Paul Tillich and philosopher Martin Buber. There are also important parallels in Martin Heidegger, whose insight shall also find its place in this chapter.

First expounded in 1933 – within two years of Gödel's landmark paper on the Incompleteness Theorem (1931) – Marcel's conception of mystery reflects a quintessentially Gödelian reasoning.⁷ However, he asserted for the first time, the implicit ontological and existential dimensions left latent in Gödel.⁸ For Marcel, a *mystery* transcends its critical counterpart, a *problem*, in a fundamentally existential way. The distinction between "mystery" and "problem" he holds to be primary. Although Marcel defined mystery *in terms of* problem, nevertheless, it is clear a mystery is a very special kind of problem indeed:

A mystery is a problem which encroaches upon its own data, invading them, as it were, and thereby transcending itself as a simple problem.⁹

A question, appearing as a "problem", inculcating its own solution, actually transcends itself as a simple problem. Exactly like the conditions for incompleteness, mystery retains its problematic. Solved problems hold no existential power. But within mystery's ever-present problematic, we

⁷ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 19.

⁸ Jacob Bronowski (1977) *A Sense of the Future*: 66.

⁹ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 19.

are drawn into speech that has no convenient ground to strike and thus touches being itself. This isn't some category *out there* but of the personal and intimate self. Paul Tillich, for whom mystery underlined theological revelation, wrote:

Whatever is mysterious cannot lose its mysteriousness even when it is revealed. Otherwise something which only seemed to be mysterious would be revealed, and not that which is essentially mysterious.¹⁰

Mystery does not appear with the sole characteristic of being *hidden*. If a mystery's character as mystery were based solely upon its *hiddenness*, disclosure would destroy its character as a mystery.¹¹ What constitutes mystery *qua* mystery is mysterious to its very core. A revealed mystery properly so-called is revealed as mysterious. Revealing a mystery reveals its mysteriousness. It is, indeed, a mystery only in the revelation of its mysteriousness. That a mystery maintains its mysteriousness in the light of its revelation immediately excludes it from scientific treatment, which is able to operate solely upon a strict enumeration of problem. It is on this point that poetic truth will be shown to exceed science.

I exclude those literary "mystery stories" (e.g., "whodunits" and so-called "detective fiction") that once solved, by the obligatory "greatest detective in the world", cease to be mysterious. They are constituted by what Marcel distinguished from mystery as a *problem*, often clever and intricately plotted, but when solved, ceasing to be problematic. A more convincing "mystery story" also revolves around a murder, but Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* employs a patricidal murder, which occurs rather late in the novel, to explore in a quite poetic way the shadow mysteries of his characters and their dark spirituality. Would all "detective fiction" be like this!

A problem properly so-called is strictly separated from its *solution*. The distinction between a problem and its solution will not be contravened. We cannot say the same thing of a mystery properly so-called. The mystery arises in every one of its solutions. Enumerating

¹⁰ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I: 121.

¹¹ Cf. Martin Heidegger "On the Origin of the Work of Art": 46ff.

solutions does not abolish mystery. The application to poetic metaphor and by extension, the whole of the poem, is already evident according to the same description that identified a poem's hermeneutic incompleteness. Yet mystery takes us beyond the limits of incompleteness into the existential realm. In this chapter, we will discover that a mystery does not merely encompass the ever-present problematic but, in a dialectical relation with this abyssal dimension, an expression of the ground of its being. This is Marcel's great insight.

Mystery in poetry

Although my discernment of Marceline mystery in metaphor and poetry came before reading Northrop Frye's account, nevertheless Frye original thesis affords a thought-provoking introduction to mystery as it applies to poetry. The parallels between Marcel and Frye are truly remarkable. Certainly, Northrop Frye held that the *understanding* of a poem advances independently of its many interpretations: Literary criticism, he said, will never be restricted to a single plane of discourse. The more familiar we become with a literary work, the more our understanding of it grows. Yet, this growth in understanding does not suggest an increase in the number of meanings we can attach to it.¹² Thus understanding poetry does not entail a multiplicity of derived interpretations but focuses on a field of disclosure, *indefinite in extent*. Each inferred meaning points into this field. To "know" a poetic mystery is, as Marcel might have said, to *recollect* or *ingather* the presence invoked by the poem.¹³ Deepening sensibilities need not simply attach more meaning. Frye argued that any commentary by a reader, translating the implicit into the explicit, only isolates aspects of meaning at a specific moment. The poet has very little to do with such critical attention. The volume of commentary in comparison to the sacred text, such as *The Bible*, is striking, demonstrating that when a poem achieves a "certain

¹² Northrop Frye (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism*: 71-2.

¹³ Whether "recollect" and "ingather" translate the same French word in Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 24 and in Gabriel Marcel (1960a) *The Mystery of Being Vol. 1: Reflection and Mystery*: 156, respectively, nevertheless, their use is identical.

degree of concentration or social recognition, the amount of commentary it will carry is infinite.”¹⁴

Like Marcel, Frye did not pause at the threshold: There is in art, he claimed, a genuine mystery, “a real place for wonder.” He identified three types of mystery in the literary context: an *extrinsic mystery* and *intrinsic mystery* and a puzzle. The “mystery” which is a puzzle, like the “whodunit” described above, is not properly a mystery by definition and has little to do with the arts except in questions of technique. He described extrinsic and intrinsic mystery as follows:

The mystery of the unknown or unknowable essence is an extrinsic mystery, which involves art only when art is also made illustrative of something else, as religious art is [...] primarily with worship. But the intrinsic mystery is that which remains a mystery in itself no matter how fully known it is, and hence is not a mystery separated from what is known. The mystery in the greatness of *King Lear* or *Macbeth* comes not from concealment but from revelation, not from something unknown or unknowable in the work, but from something unlimited in it.¹⁵

His concept of “intrinsic mystery” is precisely a poetic mystery. Although the religious poem might signify a mystery of religion – the *mystery of the Eucharist*, for example – in its character as poetry, it does so in the light of its own intrinsic mystery, which makes poetry the perfect vehicle for religious and spiritual revelation. Frye echoed Paul Tillich, who applied the conception of mystery specifically to divine revelation: What is disclosed in revelation is mystery. What is revealed in poetry, according to Frye, is its unlimited presence. Revelation, therefore, need not be restricted to the absolutism of theology. Indeed, we might add, at the heart of all theology lies a poetic text. Revelation of mystery, I believe, expresses itself poetically, no matter on what scale that revelation manifests. This fits well with Frye’s own explorations of the literature of *The Bible*,¹⁶ which yield insights of considerable use for my later chapters.

Mystery, however, should not be identified solely with a negative ever-present problematic. On the contrary, poetic mystery communicates an ontological drama that renders

¹⁴ Northrop Frye (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism*: 87-8.

¹⁵ Northrop Frye (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism*: 88.

¹⁶ Northrop Frye (1982) *The Great Code* & Northrop Frye (1990) *Words of Power*.

the poem *meaningful*. This points into the ground of its being, opened through the sense of being of the reader. A poem appeals to ears other than those of its poet, calling for the person of the reader to be present. Martin Buber wrote:

The importance of the spoken word, I think, is grounded in the fact that it does not want to remain with the speaker. It reaches out toward a hearer, it lays hold of him, it even makes the hearer into a speaker, if perhaps only a soundless one.¹⁷

The reader is granted a place precisely because of poetic mystery. The mystery of the poem becomes fully present to the reader through the mystery at the core of her or his own *sense of being*.¹⁸ Beyond the hermeneutic circle lies the realm of ontology, the mysterious realm towards which the hermeneutists reached out.¹⁹

The formal incompleteness of poetry requires a decisive act of being by the reader to realize the mystery in the poem. This decisive act is, in a strange way, a sort of “completion” of the work by bringing to it a sense of what it is *to be*. Poetry, we say, carries *truth* but it won’t stand in as an objective truth verifiable by scientific procedure. Poetic truth remains significantly *relational* in character. That is, the poem’s truth *calls* for the reader to bring him or herself into meaningful relation with the world. This *calling*, as a personal *vocation*, (see my theory chapter “On Relation”) which can also proclaim a community (see my theory chapter “On Community”), calls upon the reader to participate in its mystery.

The response to a poem has the characteristics of bringing one’s decisiveness to bear upon fulfilling the address of the poem. And yet, mystery re-emerges again within our fulfilment of the task. The reader continues to be *drawn* towards that which, in the poem, cannot be resolved precisely because it is a mystery. Marcel stated: “Literally, mystery is the prolongation and continuance of the self in that which has no convenient bottom to strike.”²⁰ And Paul Tillich said much the same thing:

¹⁷ Martin Buber (1965b) *The Knowledge of Man*: 112.

¹⁸ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 170.

¹⁹ John D. Caputo. (1987) *Radical Hermeneutics*: 271ff.

²⁰ Eugene J. Fitzgerald (1972) “Gabriel Marcel.” in Patka, Frederick (1972) *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought*: 140.

The genuine mystery appears when reason is driven beyond itself to its “ground and abyss,” to that which “precedes” reason, to the fact that “being is and non-being is not” (Parmenides), to the original fact (*Ur-Tatsache*) that there is *something* and not *nothing*. We can call this the “negative side” of the mystery [...] The positive side of the mystery – which includes the negative side – becomes manifest in actual revelation. Here the mystery appears as ground and not only abyss. It appears as the power of being, conquering non-being. It appears as our ultimate concern. And it expresses itself in symbols and myths which point to the depth of reason and its mystery.²¹

A poetic metaphor brings us to the origin – the ground and abyss – of the speaking voice.²² That literary *Is* and literal *Is-not* of poetic metaphor, marked up in the first theory chapter, captures the mystery of being and non-being in a single dialectical figure, wherein being encompasses non-being to its very core. Through the negative dimension of the abyss, the positive affirmation of the poem appears as the ground of its being.

Paul Ricoeur on poetic metaphor

From his close study of Aristotle’s *Categories* and *The Metaphysics* – especially books Γ, E, Z and Λ – Paul Ricoeur asserts that in order to rescue the diverse meanings of “Being” from dispersal caused by the paradox that “being is said in several ways,”²³ Aristotle establishes the relation of reference to a first term that is neither the univocity of a class nor the chance equivocity of a simple word. According to Ricoeur, the plurivocity of the ontological question, lying beyond all language games, is of a different order from the multiplicity of metaphorical discourse, implicating the polysemy of poetic metaphor’s “semantic aim”: “It is a plurivocity of the same order,” he claims, “as the very question that opened up the speculative field.”²⁴ The primary term – *ousia* – places all the other terms in the realm of meaning outlined by the question: “What is Being?” All other definitions of “being” point towards this central focus, although they are not “species” of being, but point determinately through their conditionality

²¹ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1: 122-3.

²² Gaston Bachelard (1969) *The Poetics of Space*: xix.

²³ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*:260.

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*:260.

towards unconditional *ousia*, or “Being”: “The regulated polysemy of being orders the apparently disordered polysemy of the predicative function.”²⁵ Hidden within this sense of *ousia*, or “Being”, is the unacknowledged conception of Marceline mystery. The fact that Ricoeur, either unwittingly or otherwise, ignores Marceline mystery will have considerable repercussions for his theory of poetic metaphor and, therefore, for poetry as a whole.

In like manner to the non-substantial categories that can be predicates of substance, therefore, adding their distinctions to Being (*ousia*), so for every particular being, the realm of predication exhibits the same “concentric structure extending progressively farther from a ‘substantial’ centre, and the same expansion of meaning through the addition of determinations.”²⁶ But, says Ricoeur, this particular process has nothing in common with poetic metaphor:

The ordered equivocalness of being and poetic equivocalness move on radically distinct levels. Philosophical discourse sets itself up as the vigilant watchman overseeing the ordered extensions of meaning; against this background, the unfettered extensions of meaning in poetic discourse spring free.²⁷

There are certain presumptions that determine the particular categorical imperatives driving Ricoeur’s discourse here. The presumption of philosophy’s primary use of critical discourse, as I have identified it, lies central to all the modes of rational discourse understood by Ricoeur. That is only to be expected. Unfortunately, this also serves to limit his conception of the poetic which he persistently places under the banner of poetic metaphor’s “semantic aims”. He persistently favours rationality over its perceived opposite, irrationality. That too is to be expected. However, there is little recognition of the *non-rational*, that which transcends both the rational and the irrational, although he made forays into the onto- theology of Aquinas,²⁸ and into Heidegger and Derrida on metaphysics.²⁹ His teacher Gabriel Marcel set the “meta-problematic”

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*:261.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*:261.

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*:261.

²⁸ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 272-280

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 280-295.

which is properly the transcendent realm of mystery, over what he termed the “problematic”,³⁰ thereby setting the non-rationality of the meta-problematical into the transcendent realm over the rationality of the sphere of the “problematic”. The non-rational does not collapse into irrationality, except under certain conditions instigated by the application of an external power, such as the power of rationalist categorisation. The literary *Is* and the literal *Is-not* of the poetic metaphor, to which Ricoeur himself drew our attention, could hardly be contained within the rationalist frame of the semantics clearly favoured by Ricoeur. In my view, it calls for a dialectical transcendence. Furthermore, the ontological question, that prompted Marcel towards mystery, is also clearly in evidence in the poetic metaphor. The “different order” of the order intrinsic to philosophical discourse upon the ontological question, does not, in the end, differ so very greatly from the hermeneutics of poetic metaphor.

Ricoeur seeks the key to the *ontological clarification of reference* by attending to the multiple meanings of “being” within speculative thought. This he undertakes by appealing to Aristotle’s distinction between *being as potentiality* and *being as actuality*, thereby extending what he deems to be the field of ontological polysemy to include these modes of being.³¹ The resonances with Jakobson’s “split reference”, in which Jakobson characterised the effect upon the reference function of the poetic function through its literary *Is* and the literal *Is-not*, are clear. With the parallels of the *Is* with the *actuality* of being and the *Is-not* with the *potentials* of being, Ricoeur concluded the ultimate meaning of the reference of poetic discourse is articulated solely in speculative discourse because, he argued, *actuality* only has meaning in the speculative discourse on being. The “semantic aim of metaphorical utterance” intersects most decisively with the aim of ontological discourse at the point where the reference of metaphorical utterance brings being as actuality and as potentiality into play.³²

³⁰ Gabriel Marcel. (1956) “On the Ontological Mystery”: ?

³¹ The likeness of Ricoeur’s treatment of these concepts has some similarity to Kierkegaard’s concepts of necessity (actuality) and possibility (potentiality) discussed below in Theory Chapter 3: On Enrichment

³² Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 307

Does this imply the philosophical gerund of “Being” is a poetic metaphor? But this question concerning the origin of the philosophical gerund is, I believe, in reverse to what it should be: The implication is that, rather than Being as a poetic metaphor, though it does behave like one as a mystery, it is rather that poetic metaphor is a *recognition of being as a mystery* in all its profound ambiguity and cantankerous particularity. One notes that, while Ricoeur skirts the central question of mystery in relation to Being, he does not avoid some of its consequences: “Discourse on being is the site henceforth of an unending investigation. Ontology continues to be the ‘sought after science.’”³³

Ricoeur is largely unable to step beyond the semantic field that informs his critical discourse, what he terms, as philosophical discourse: “speculative discourse.” The metaphorical tension between the *Is* and *Is-not*, both scrambles this semantic field and breaks the reference field, not into a simple Jakobson-like bifurcation but, into an ontological sense that neither closes the being so sensed nor closes the semantic meaning to be thus derived. Ricoeur said this about ‘analogy’ in his final chapter of *The Rule of Metaphor* but did not apply it to poetic metaphor as such, although poetic metaphor manifests the substantive topic of his magnum opus. Indeed, in this final chapter, he placed *analogy* into relation with Being in a way he largely denied to metaphor. By refusing to acknowledge the paradox of the poetic metaphor in recognising, as Russell was forced to recognise how the paradox in mathematics could not be reasoned away,³⁴ that the paradox enabled an entirely new relationship with the world, a consequence of the paradox and its dynamism in realising the sense of being intrinsic to a Marceline mystery. Ricoeur’s argument concerning analogy, that it did not create simply another conceptual focus, another centralising meaning but sought the transcendence of the ontological, should properly have been applied, in my view, to poetic metaphor. All through his speculative discourse, closely argued in detail and well-reasoned though it is, the identity of poetic metaphor seems to have remained largely limited to Jakobson’s insights, in particular his concept of the “split-reference”,

³³ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 266.

³⁴ Bertrand Russell. (1967) *Autobiography*: 150-1.

in combination with a *semantic* manoeuvre that retained the metaphor in the conjunction of double semantic fields, that which, in my view, is more appropriate to critical *analogy*. Jakobson posited split-reference as a means of negotiating the profound ambiguity inaugurated by the self-focusing message. Yet, its bifurcated reference, nevertheless, fell well short of the open-ended polysemy perpetually rendered by poetic incompleteness. The essential dynamic factor of *poetic* incompleteness, both in its tendency to advance *beyond* polysemy (that polysemy, as a mere product of poetic incompleteness, remains essentially and irrevocably insufficient for the attempt of closing poetic interpretation), indeed *transcends* polysemy, and implying the further dialectical transcendent stage of Marceline *mystery*, was sadly not recognised by Ricoeur and because of this, he failed to grasp the dialectical possibilities that incompleteness might have instigated. *The Rule of Metaphor* is, if anything, a major work of *post-structuralism* – particularly in respect of its structuralism tempered and enlarged by the insights of semantics and of certain philosophers, notably Aristotle – a work of great discursive breadth and precision but ultimately failing to step much beyond a semantic interpretation of metaphor, in which poetic metaphor is continually framed by its “semantic aims”.³⁵ Ricoeur identifies the “semantic aim of metaphorical utterance” as *decisively intersecting* with the “aim of ontological discourse”,³⁶ as mentioned above; the latter encompassed by his proposed model for philosophical discourse: “speculative discourse.” While he frustratingly steps on the heels of Marceline *mystery*,³⁷ a philosophy that he would have had at his fingertips, nevertheless, its possibilities were never to be realised. This is made even more frustrating given that the work he quoted on numerous occasions in *The Rule of Metaphor* – specifically in relation to “mood” as related to poetic image,³⁸ to the ‘hypothetical’ nature of poetic image,³⁹ and to the pertinence of symbol as “any discernible unit of meaning”⁴⁰ – was Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, which contained the

³⁵ E.g., Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 259, 283, and so on.

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 307.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 277.

³⁸ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 148, 227,

³⁹ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 229.

⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur (1978) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 225.

notable description of mystery in the poem discussed in the previous section. I cannot help but liken his unwillingness to return to the philosophy of his teacher, Gabriel Marcel, to the inability of Henri Poincare, rightly regarded as the greatest mathematician of his time, to even foreshadow the emergence of Einstein's theories of relativity. Poincare knew the mathematics behind relativity far better than anyone including Einstein himself but, in a sense, he knew it far too well, failing to see the wood for the trees. Why Ricoeur did not make this fundamental step one can only speculate, but it appears to be very much a Poincare effect.

The Riddle of the Sphinx

We reach a threshold in poetic interpretation the moment we realize an infinite regress is present. For Marcel, an infinite regress already implies transcendence in some way.⁴¹ A mystery, as Marcel and Tillich conceive it, is fundamentally *ontological*. Whereas a *problem* belongs properly to critical discourse, a *mystery* crosses the boundaries of objectivity to address core issues of personal existence. Epimenides the Cretan stated quite unreservedly: "All Cretans are liars!" This famous paradox places into question what it is to be a *Cretan* and what it is to be a *liar*. An ancient Cretan promoted a question that still haunts modern identity: "Who am I?" This is pertinent to poetry because it keeps open the question of *whether this poem is meaningful to me*. The conflict between the metaphorical copula *Is* and its implicit *Is-not* produces the same kind of paradox as the Cretan paradox, questioning the status of what it is *to be* in the being of that which is simultaneously both declared and denied. That questioning, the questioning of the reader defends and threatens the relation the reader has with the being of that which is affirmed. Like Epimenides, poetic interpretation might take the guise of a logical game to be played at leisure but, in earnest, its questioning plumbs the ineffable depths of that which has no convenient bottom to strike. And in attempting to provide an answer to the questioning, inevitably the underlying ontological problem – "who am I?" – lies at its very heart, a thought that, like the Cretan Paradox, we also owe to the ancient Greeks.

⁴¹ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 17-18.

At Delphi, the words over the entrance to the oracle's grotto still haunt the modern mind: "Know thyself." This demand might be technically answerable: I am... a writer, an architect, a librarian, a philosopher, a poet... Yet how empty are such conventional descriptors. The question "Who am I?" occurs ever anew in the interrogative at the heart of thought itself. We are fundamentally questioning beings, as Heidegger argued.⁴² So confronting the poem in its indeterminacy poses the central question "Is this poem meaningful to me?" and calls for our response. At the heart of such a question lies the indomitable mystery and the question of personal identity within our own *sense of being*. In order to appreciate the poem in this deeper sense, we have to step up to the work in such a way as to respond to its mystery with our living sense of being. Poetic metaphor grants its literary *Is* through our own *Is-ness* (or *sense of being*). Dialectically, the literal *Is-not* also comes to be granted through our own *Is-not-ness*. Dare we say: "Our sense of *non-being*"? We grasp the poem as *meaningful* by responding to its mystery through the mystery in ourselves.

At its simplest, poetry touches upon and opens our sense of being – being a being, being in this world – thus becoming meaningful. We read the words and say "That's right!" though we have not yet calculated in what way the poem accomplishes this personal relevance. We acknowledge the recognition of our own recognition of the poem's recognition, the recognition that affirms itself on every plane of discourse, yet dialectically is also negated upon every plane. That *sense of being a being* is something about which we cannot speak without poetic metaphor. But the mystery of self cannot be encompassed even with such an apparently all encompassing expression as "sense of being a being." The impossible depth of that which is meaningful makes any such phrase glib and lacking in ontological weight. This is where poetry comes into its own.

Marcel's definition of *mystery* is a succinct redaction anticipating Paul Tillich and the later Martin Heidegger, with whom Marcel bears a kindred spirit in philosophy, as the discussions on Heidegger's concept of "thinking" placed into juxtaposition with Marceline

⁴² Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 9.

mystery demonstrates. Marcel's conception of mystery was first proposed to address the ontological question: "What is man?" Aside from problems with gender – which I will not discuss here since they have been discussed at length by others – the question is a mystery properly so-called because in asking it, I am also asking "Who am I?" There can be no distance between myself as a person and the answer to this question. I am called upon to identify myself. Yet as I bring answers to bear upon the question, it becomes patently clear that I cannot consciously know all there is to know about myself, about everyone else, nor what it is to be a person without including that tacit sense of being not fully available to critical analysis. Critical reason pauses at the threshold to poetry because the dialectical paradox marks its outermost limit. We find poetry possesses an intimate connection with our sense of being a being, encapsulated in the succinct redaction of Marcel's ontological question. In the poetry of Sophocles' most famous play, these questions of existence are clothed in drama of extraordinary power. Over all its proceedings hangs the Riddle of the Sphinx, to which we shall now turn because it provides a portrait of the ontological question in its tragic problematic and equally tragic ground.

When Oedipus confronted the Sphinx – "that flinty singer" – at the gates of Thebes, she posed her terrifying riddle: *What is it that walks on two legs in the afternoon, three legs in the evening and four legs in the morning?* In other words: "Who is the being that is alternatively *dipous*, *tripous*, and *tetrapous*?"⁴³ The name "Oedipus" can be rendered by its Greek homonym "oi-dipous," with implications already abundantly clear to Sophocles' audience. In his commentary on *Oedipus*, Jean-Pierre Vernant wrote:

Of course the answer is himself, man. But his reply is only apparent, not real knowledge: The true problem that is still masked is: What then is man, what is Oedipus?⁴⁴

⁴³ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 12.

⁴⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 124.

This is a very ancient riddle indeed, still with profound implications. Intertwining lines of identity and misunderstanding in Sophocles' extraordinary tragedy form a complex plot replete with the meaningful in judging the extent to which mystery incorporates the riddles of being.⁴⁵ It is my contention that the mystery in poetry is intimately connected with these ever-recurring riddles of being. How do we make sense of its mystery without explaining it away? Perhaps the ancient Greeks can provide us with an answer.

The plots of Greek tragedy are based upon *αναγκη* (*anangke*), the rule of fate dominating intergenerational conflict within the houses of Atreus (the Mycenaean cycle) and of Labdacid (the Theban cycle). Upon the ancient stage, mythological rites embodied the dark underbelly of tribal morality in blood vengeance and retribution. These are not modern individualistic dramas. Rather, they pierce the chthonic layers of the Greek psyche at a period when temple processions⁴⁶ wound their way through sacred precincts dressed in architecture that took its forms and decorations from ritual sacrifice,⁴⁷ a period when the city-state legal system sat side by side with blood vendetta.⁴⁸ Against this background, tragedy bore the dark weight of mystery itself, casting its protagonists into violent confrontation with the paradoxes of being. While the source myths of tragedy set in action the machinery of *αναγκη*, the predicament in which it placed its protagonists is far from a technical exercise. Wole Soyinka pointed out, the psychological drama in which the hero is subject to a "tragic flaw," is a modern refinement in tragedy.⁴⁹ Instead, the hero hangs by the paradox of *αναγκη* unable to be anything else than *who* and *what* he is, *where* he is, for this is the fundament of his own being. Oedipus is the archetypal innocent, yet he *is* his tragedy. Greek tragedy transcends the world of Thomas Hardy where *character* alone constitutes fate. *Oedipus the King* plums the deeper mystery of being itself.

⁴⁵ Richmond Hathorn (1958) "The Existential Oedipus": 227.

⁴⁶ The ritual aspect in the structure of Sophocles' play is best presented to date in the translation of Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald (1977) "Oedipus Rex": 1-78.

⁴⁷ George Hersey (1988) *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*.

⁴⁸ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 23-28.

⁴⁹ Wole Soyinka (1976) *Myth, Literature and the African World*: 14.

The forgotten history of Oedipus's birth and abandonment conflicts directly with his presumed history, making each of his well-intended pronouncements darkly ironic. Like Epimenides, Oedipus unwittingly lives an existential paradox.⁵⁰ Oedipus must eventually find out that he alone *is* the murderer of his own father, that he *is* the son of his own wife and that he *is* the brother to his own children, his incest confusing the generations so succinctly separated in the Riddle of the Sphinx. Knowing who he is, Oedipus realizes his tragedy and the dread weight of the mystery he carries, not as a problem "out there" to be solved technically but embroiling his own necessity. The pestilence inflicted on the city of Thebes derives from the paradoxes at the heart of Oedipus, not, as he had assumed, a functional dysfunction imposed from outside. The mystery of Oedipus could only be answered by a terrible act of self-mutilation to deface the abomination he had become.

Only the on-going ritual of living itself, repeating the questioning of mystery in every moment, can "complete" the play and the poem, a completion in that which is at bottom incomplete. Oedipus confronted the abysmal darkness in the gods' bitter silence to his cruel sacrifice. When Creon became king, he wouldn't pass judgment upon Oedipus precisely because the gods were silent. Creon, remaining trapped in the technical limitations of his rule, steadfastly withholding the decision that might transcend the paradox presented by Oedipus. Oedipus, however, passed judgment upon himself and this marks his true courage and nobility.⁵¹ He embodied the transcendent where even the gods will be silent in the face of the deep paradoxes of being. Mystery is formally – that is, systemically – undecidable. Therefore the answer to the Riddle of the Sphinx remains incomplete.⁵² Yet its solution must truly lie in the being of Oedipus and the being of his audience for we are no mere spectators to this unfolding drama. Questioning the meaning of the tragedy – "Who is Oedipus?" – resolves into questioning the self – "Who am

⁵⁰ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 118.

⁵¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 80.

⁵² Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 139.

I?” – and such questioning is by nature *an enactment of a mystery, of that which is ultimately meaningful to me*. This is a fundamental truth of poetry.

Poetry and thinking being

Although Martin Heidegger did not see mystery at work in the poem, perceiving instead an ongoing internal “strife”, rather similar to the intrinsic contradiction of poetic metaphor in the *Is* and *Is-not*, nevertheless he urged something exactly like mystery in what he called “thinking.” The word *thinking*, here, is quite different from its usual sense, commonly taken to be synonymous with “reasoning” or, in its philosophical guise, as the rationalistic radical doubt advocated by Descartes.⁵³ *Thinking* in Heidegger’s sense, however, represents a relationship with the indeterminacy of the hermeneutical circle – the inherent circularity of all understanding. “What is called thinking?” asked Heidegger. This question calls forth that which is called for to resolve the question. Yet the question calls itself forth into the very data by which a resolution to the question is attempted. That is identical to Marceline mystery:

The answer to the question “What is called thinking?” is, of course, a statement, but not a proposition that could be formed into a sentence with which the question can be put aside as settled. The answer to the question is, of course, an utterance, but it speaks from a correspondence. It follows the calling, and maintains the question in its problematic. When we follow the calling, we do not free ourselves of what is being asked.

The question cannot be settled, now or ever. If we proceed to the encounter of what is here in question, the calling, the question becomes in fact only more problematical. When we are questioning within this problematic, we are thinking.⁵⁴

However, it needs to be noted that in an earlier paper, Heidegger’s substantive allegory of *strife* between *concealedness* (“earth”) and *unconcealedness* (“world”)⁵⁵ diverted him to a certain extent from applying *thinking proper* to poetry until very much later in his career.

⁵³ René Descartes (1912) *A Discourse on Method; Meditations on the first philosophy; Principles of philosophy*: 79-84.

⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 168.

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger “On the Origin of the Work of Art”: 63ff.

Holding “earth” and “world” as substantive categories – derived from an idiosyncratic reading of Greek temple architecture⁵⁶ – Heidegger took his certain metaphors too categorically.⁵⁷ But strictly speaking, even in his later work, Heidegger did not believe *thinking* coincided with poetry as such. *Poesy*, he said, is placed *alongside* thinking because it rests upon thinking:

[T]he thinking back to what is to be thought is the source and ground of poesy. This is why poesy is the water that at times flows backward toward the source, toward thinking as a thinking back, a recollection.⁵⁸

Thinking, he tells us, does not make poetry, but represents, instead, a “primal telling and speaking of language,” and accordingly thinking will remain close but not identical to poesy.⁵⁹

Thinking, no matter how close to poesy, is separated from it by a substantial difference:

Yet we have placed thinking close to poesy, and at a distance from science. Closeness, however, is something essentially different from the vacuous levelling of differences. The essential closeness of poesy and thinking is so far from excluding their difference that, on the contrary, it establishes that difference in an abysmal manner.⁶⁰

Heidegger thus differentiates poetry from *thinking*. Yet he continually employed poetry, especially Hölderlin, to enlarge upon *thinking*. His position remained, therefore, profoundly ambivalent.

However, we should understand Heideggerean *thinking* to be a significant reaction to poetic mystery. We recognize in a mystery how the problematic encroaches upon its own data, arising again and again in that data. And that in our many encounters with a poem, the question of how *meaningful* it is arises anew with each reading. Furthermore, within the very result of our reflection upon the poem, the question emerges repeatedly in the very fabric of our thought. Yet, unlikely as it sounds, we are able to reach certain conclusions within the very ground of that ever-present contingency. The eternal problematic *points towards* that which is most *meaningful*

⁵⁶ Cf. Vincent Scully (1979) *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods*.

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger “The Origin of the Work of Art”: 41-4.

⁵⁸ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 11.

⁵⁹ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 135.

⁶⁰ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 134.

in the poem. Poetic ambiguity is, therefore, of a special kind in this respect. We are placed into a situation where any conclusions we reach are always in tension with their contingency. The nature of this tension bears weight for us precisely because of mystery. In our deep relation with poetic mystery, we are properly *thinking* in the Heideggerean sense.

The withdrawal of mystery

All critical restatement of poetic metaphor divides the mystery into that which is *revealed* and that which *withdraws*. Critical restatement assigns everything *silenced* to *non-being*, but this non-being lingers to *haunt* its interpreter. The *Is* of the metaphor reappears in each restatement but its ever-present *Is-not* continues to be potent in the haunting silence of non-being. The moment I attempt to grasp that mystery by way of a critical restatement, I am, as Gabriel Marcel says, on the point of *betraying it*.⁶¹ Consequently, mystery steps away from me and *withdraws*. Yet, as Heidegger declares for a related idea, *what is more present than it is?* As I reach forward critically to grasp it, it shrinks further from my grasp. Being appears to turn away, withdrawing from us. Since the beginning, claims the Freiberg philosopher.⁶² He wrote:

[H]ow can we have the least knowledge of something that withdraws from the beginning, how can we even give it a name? Whatever withdraws, refuses arrival. But – withdrawing is not nothing. Withdrawal is an event. In fact, what withdraws may even concern and claim man more essentially than anything present that strikes and touches him. Being struck by actuality is what we like to regard as constitutive of the actuality of the actual. However, in being struck by what is actual, man may be debarred precisely from what concerns and touches him – touches him in the surely mysterious way of escaping him by its withdrawal.⁶³

In poetic interpretation, mystery dissolves into lexical ambiguity, a shimmering mirage towards which, no matter how far we travel forward, we never draw any closer. Yet mystery's ever-present problematic touches us as profoundly as a poem's concrete iconic presence. We are *drawn towards* that which withdraws:

⁶¹ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 18.

⁶² Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 7.

⁶³ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 8.

What withdraws from us, draws us along by its very withdrawal, whether or not we become aware of it immediately, or at all. Once we are drawn into the withdrawal, we are drawing toward what draws, attracts us by its withdrawal.⁶⁴

As with Martin Buber's "Eclipse of God," in which the withdrawal of God from us is occasioned by more than our withdrawal from God: "But it is not a process which can be adequately accounted for by instancing the changes that have taken place in man's spirit. An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself."⁶⁵ The withdrawal which Heidegger describes is occasioned in its withdrawal independent of our withdrawal from it. However, it is certainly conditional upon *who we are* in that no withdrawal could have taken place without our complicity.

That which has withdrawn is, paradoxically, that which has most presence. "Presence" here means a charismatic openness of being that is not confined to an act of perception upon some material object before me. This features the presence of revelation as the ground of being. That which has most presence might not be *before* me, certainly not in the *manner* of an object, and perhaps not before me *at all*. And yet it is indubitably bound with my own *sense of being*:

[O]nce we, being so attracted, are drawing toward what draws us, our essential nature already bears the stamp of "drawing toward." As we are drawing toward what withdraws, we ourselves are pointers pointing toward it. We are who we are by pointing in that direction – not like an incidental adjunct but as follows: this "drawing toward" is in itself an essential and therefore constant pointing toward what withdraws. To say "drawing toward" is to say "pointing to what withdraws."⁶⁶

A meaning, derived from interpretation of a poetic metaphor, is made meaningful *because it points into mystery*. All meanings are thus made *meaningful*, not because of an underlying secondary connotation, in the manner of Barthesian "myth",⁶⁷ but because they point towards the mysterious fulcrum of being that is disclosed by the poem. Mystery exceeds our

⁶⁴Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 8-9.

⁶⁵Martin Buber (1979) *Eclipse of God*: 23.

⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 8-9.

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes (1972) "Myth today":

grasp, holds itself withdrawn from us yet remains present within the deep *sense of being a being* underpinning all that we are and all we truly know. Heidegger says, as we point towards that which has withdrawn, *we are the pointer*, not someone first who occasionally points: “[D]rawn into what withdraws, drawing toward it and thus pointing into withdrawal, the person is first a person.” My essential nature lies in being such a pointer.⁶⁸ Drawn to a poem, it *speaks to me*, although I am unable to explain why the poem speaks so profoundly. The withdrawal of mystery confronts us with a choice, a choice to step forward and bestow our senses of being a being. And the poem obtains the mystery that invites the reader to bestow a sense of being a being. *The poem does the pointing in our reading*. That is precisely what William Wimsatt said.

The pointing icon

When William Wimsatt posed the problem of poetic ambiguity in terms of a paradox, he opened up the possibility of poetic mystery. He says that a poem achieves its concrete particularity by the “extra relevance or hyperrelevance” of its words taken in their “fullest, most inclusive and symbolic character”, a fine description of meaning made meaningful by the insistence of words interrelating across the body of the poem. The sense in which a poem becomes meaningful is underlined by its “hyperrelevance”, when that which is underlined by a deeper significance than mere semantic sense, is made most meaningful:

Through its meaning or meanings the poem *is*. It has iconic solidity. Thus in a sense the poem is a paradox, through the quality of extra significance or hypervocalism becoming anomalous among verbal expressions. The poem has, not an abstractly meant or intended meaning, but a fullness of actually presented meaning.⁶⁹

Wimsatt’s resolution to the enigma of “hyperrelevance” comes from considering the poem a kind of “road sign,” something that exists in and for itself as a solid thing that *points* to that which gives it its necessity. I was tempted, when I first encountered this explanation, to dismiss the metaphor of the “road sign,” because it seemed too much like an ordinary semantic

⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 9.

⁶⁹ William Wimsatt (1958) *The Verbal Icon*: 231-2.

symbol signifying its *referent*. But it is now clear to me, how much Wimsatt's "road sign" aims to take us beyond Fregean semantics. What Wimsatt was attempting to explain was his conviction that poetry transcended the semantic limits of ordinary speech. A poem achieves both iconic status and creates the situation for a process rather like Alfred North Whitehead's process-philosophy concept of a "prehension".⁷⁰ That is, the "road sign" shows us a poem belongs to the world, a concrete being-in-the-world, while locating the poem in *relation* with the world, gaining value from *pointing towards*, not as a fixed, static entity but a process in which we participate.

The withdrawal of poetic mystery facilitates a *pointing towards*. Thus, that which *distantiates* by drawing away, also dialectically *points us towards* that which is affirmed by the poem. The mystery into which we are ushered, does *point toward* and this I interpret as *attitudinal* because it directs the reader towards... But we are not expected to conform to a particular, reifying "attitude" – in Buber's terminology: *I-It* – that both defines the *thing* towards which we are thus oriented and the fixed demeanour we are supposed to take with respect to that definite object, as, for example, in the fixed viewing-point of the perspective. Here within poetry, its attitude accomplishes the "pointing towards" where, within calling forth my *sense of being*, I am able to call up a *sense of the being* relative to my own sense of being for what is affirmed, towards which the poem points. The poem thereby maintains a special kind of attitude, one that fulfils what Martin Buber calls "the Between": that "space" in which an *I* relates with a *Thou*. In other words, a third dialectical mode of description, albeit grounded upon both incompleteness and mystery, is *relation*. This tertiary mode emerges as notably *dialogical*, just as mystery encompasses the *ontological* and incompleteness, its *hermeneutics*. And similar to Martin Buber, we understand the dialogical as that which brings *relation* to fruition, brings *being a being* to fruition in dialogue and brings *meaning* to its apotheosis in the *meaningful*.

⁷⁰ Alfred North Whitehead (1938) *Science and the Modern World*: 86-92.

Paradox and the relative breach

The *relative breach* implied by mystery stands in direct contradistinction to Heidegger's *absolute breach*. An absolute breach was necessary for Heidegger to formulate the specific ontological values of *Earth* and *World*, those essentialist categories he believed constituted within the work of art, representing the principles of a *jutting hiddenness* and a *receiving unhiddenness*, respectably.⁷¹ Certainly, he held *Earth* and *World* were literally real ontologies in conflict with each other, causing "strife" in the civil war of the work of art.⁷² But his categories, derived as noted from a highly dubious portrait of Greek temple architecture, overburden art with an inappropriate allegory. A *relative breach*, on the other hand, provides for both the *distantiation* of a mystery in its abyssal aspect and room for *ground* in an affirmation of ontological values. In poetry we are dealing with ambiguity of special significance. Paul Ricoeur said poetic metaphor incorporates the literary *Is* at its heart in the context of its literal negation *Is-not*. Certainly we find paradox in the ever-present interaction between the literary *Is* with its literal *Is not*. But Heidegger's "word-associative combinations and complications"⁷³ vastly overstates the situation. Ricoeur wrote:

The paradox consists in the fact there is no other way to do justice to the notion of metaphorical truth than to include the critical incision of the (literal) 'is not' within the ontological vehemence of the (metaphorical) 'is.' In doing so, the thesis merely draws the most extreme consequence of the theory of tension. In the same way that logical distance is preserved in metaphorical proximity, and in the same way as the impossible literal interpretation is not simply abolished by the metaphorical interpretation but submits to it while resisting, so the ontological affirmation obeys the principle of tension and the law of 'stereoscopic vision.'⁷⁴

By "stereoscopic vision", Ricoeur alludes to Roman Jakobson's "split reference". That which epitomizes the *Is* of the poetic metaphor, and the *Is-like* of the poetic simile, identifies what is most mysterious in the identity of that which is identified. Ricoeur notes the impossibility

⁷¹ Martin Heidegger (1971) "On the Origin of the Work of Art": 69.

⁷² Martin Heidegger (1971) "On the Origin of the Work of Art": 63.

⁷³ Martin Buber (1965b) *The Knowledge of Man*: 152-3.

⁷⁴ Paul Ricoeur (1975) *The Rule of Metaphor*: 255-6.

of the literal interpretation of a metaphor in its *Is-not*. That serves to distantiate the metaphor itself from that which is identified by its *Is*. The dialectical ground of *disengagement* is thus accomplished the very moment of *affirmation*. The metaphoric *Is* manifests an affirmation of identity, made possible by this fundamental disengagement. Here the impossible literal interpretation of the metaphor remains potent. It must do so if disengagement is to be affected. What makes the metaphor *literally impossible* is not merely its apparent absurdity, but also any critical interpretation, relying upon *qualification* to reduce language's natural tendency to ambiguity, can never be complete. And in the critical interpretation, the original intuition of the metaphor is, as Hegel would say, negated. Every qualification continues to be undermined by the ever-expanding hermeneutic spiral. However, the question arises: Can we be *drawn towards* that which is *disengaged* from us?

Perhaps we can *only* be drawn towards that from which we are disengaged. But it must be stated from the outset that *disengagement* need not entail a *denial* of that from which it is disengaged.⁷⁵ This disengagement bears no resemblance to that strict denial advocated by Descartes in the epistemological moment of his radical doubt. There is doubt but not his *absolute* doubt. In his discussion of the ontological mystery, Gabriel Marcel believes this *disengagement* or *detachment* is accomplished within the context of *recollection*⁷⁶ or, as elsewhere, *ingatheredness*.⁷⁷ Recollection forms the basis in which we become indubitably real to ourselves, not merely as living creatures at the mercy of life, of living conditions and of the environment, but capable of *re-collecting* the self as a unity. Ingatheredness drives the subject beyond the formal contradiction between "action" and "being". In recollection, the subject who acts seeks his or her own unity. That unity is the creation of the sense of being a being in its exclusivity. This action both abandons to... and relaxes in the presence of... "[Y]et there is no noun for these

⁷⁵ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "Existence and Human Freedom": 81.

⁷⁶ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 24

⁷⁷ Gabriel Marcel (1960a) *The Mystery of Being* vol. 1: 156.

prepositions to govern,” wrote Gabriel Marcel. “The way stops at the threshold.”⁷⁸ Paul Tillich agrees:

“Mystery,” in this proper sense, is derived from *muein*, “closing the eyes” or “closing the mouth.” In gaining ordinary knowledge it is necessary to open one’s eyes in order to grasp the object and to open one’s mouth in order to communicate with other persons and to have one’s insights tested. A genuine mystery, however, is experienced in an attitude which contradicts the attitude of ordinary cognition. The eyes are “closed” because the genuine mystery transcends the act of seeing, of confronting objects whose structures and relations present themselves to a subject for his knowledge. Mystery characterizes a dimension which “precedes” the subject-object relationship. The same dimension is indicated in the “closing of the mouth”.⁷⁹

Hans-Georg Gadamer likened the detachment of the work of art to Husserl’s “eidetic reduction” or “*epoche*” in which all experience of contingent reality is *bracketed*:

Whoever seeks to describe the mysterious character of art, and above all of poetry, will not be able to avoid expressing himself in a similar way, and will talk of the idealizing tendency of art.⁸⁰

Poetic mystery is grounded on the same *relative* breach – it could hardly be *absolute* or else the poem could never reconnect with the world, or the reader with the poem – between the poem and the world, its world, the poet’s world, and between the poem and the reader. That, which disengages the poem from the world, disengages the poem from the reader. That which disengages the poem from the world also serves to turn the poem back to face the world towards which it points. It cannot *point towards* without this detachment. That which disengages the poem from the reader – we might say the poem is “difficult to understand” – serves to draw the reader on, in keeping with the poem’s “difficulty”, for without the reader’s *sense of being a being* in her or his *exclusivity* there can be no orientation of the poem to the world. The poem points to the world through an appeal to this sense of being. It was Martin Buber who recognized

⁷⁸ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “On the Ontological Mystery.”: 23.

⁷⁹ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I: 120-1.

⁸⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer. (1986) “Philosophy and Poetry” *in* *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*: 133.

that a “primal setting at a distance” was a necessary condition for relation.⁸¹ When we stop at the point of differentiation and fail to re-ignite poetic mystery, distance *solidifies* and true relation collapses. Furthermore, the mystery collapses into an ever-increasing set of problems that never ceases. Overwhelmed by problems, we collapse under that dread weight. I believe what is generally called “writer’s block” is something like this. However, “setting at a distance” also means that we gain the potential of *facing towards* that which is *set at a distance*. Relation can only commence when something has been set opposite.

Gabriel Marcel understood how the very insistence of a mystery necessitated detachment:

We are in the sphere where it is no longer possible to dissociate the idea itself from the certainty or the degree of certainty which pertains to it. Because this idea *is* certainty, it *is* the assurance of itself; it is, in this sense, something other and something more than an idea. As for the term *content of thought...*, it is deceptive in the highest degree. For content is, when all is said and done, derived from experience; whereas it is only by way of liberation and detachment from experience that we can possibly rise to the level...of mystery. This liberation must be *real*; this detachment must be *real*; they must not be an abstraction, that is to say a fiction recognized as such.⁸²

Metaphor posits itself as a mystery properly so-called. Therein lies the condition upon which poetry derives its extraordinary power to affirm being as it is. Sadly, this may not always be the case. As habit empties a metaphor of relational possibility, the metaphor dies. In a “dead metaphor” mystery has ceased. The dead metaphor stands wholly circumscribed by the hermeneutical boundaries of qualification, having been proscribed as a *term* by the dictionary. When so familiar that there is nothing but a conventional interpretation, the poem dies.

It has not been possible to identify the nature of poetic mystery without touching upon those qualities of poetry: “affirmation” and “exclusivity,” “distance” and “relation,” all to be explored at greater length in subsequent chapters. The fact of a certain, but not absolute, distance is essential for room to be made for the *pointing towards* of a poetic relation. The space between

⁸¹ Martin Buber (1965b) *The Knowledge of Man*: 60.

⁸² Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “Ontological Mystery”: 22-3.

poem and world, as between poem and reader, is not abyssal but full of relational potential. Poetry, as the *pointing towards*, stands as the hub around which a true relation with the world is made possible.

Revelation in poetry

Under the aegis of critical discourse, it is inevitable a mystery will be broken down to a set of problems. Martin Buber describes this as the “exalted melancholy of our fate, that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*.”⁸³ Certainly, Marcel’s modes of *mystery* and *problem* bear more than a passing resemblance to Buber’s realms of *Thou* and *It* respectively. Buber said that as a relation becomes codified or threaded through with a means to an end, the *Thou* transforms to an *It*, an object among objects. In turning from mystery to problem, the way to realizing a poem’s sense of being in that which is meaningful to its reader, is blocked. Paul Tillich wrote:

It is impossible to express the experience of mystery in ordinary language, because this language has grown out of, and is bound to, the subject-object scheme. If mystery is expressed in ordinary language, it necessarily is misunderstood, reduced to another dimension, desecrated.⁸⁴

Tillich speaks of the conventional mode of “ordinary language” in a way cognate with critical discourse. Mystery catapults us into a transcendent realm, in which being is affirmed not just as *asserted* but as *asserting itself*: In the words of Gabriel Marcel: “[It is] an affirmation which I *am* rather than an affirmation which I *utter*: By uttering it I break it, I divide it, I am on the point of betraying it.”⁸⁵ Even in confronting poetic mystery, introducing further utterance to complement that primary relation – as in, for example, a critical paraphrase – threatens to *dislocate* the reader from the poem. I mean “dislocate” quite literally as a *rupture* between reader and poem, thereby negating the poem and, quite possibly, the reader too.

Whereas incompleteness represents poetry’s negative hermeneutic, we find it infers poetic mystery, on the ontological plane where both its negativity and positivity fulfil the

⁸³ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 16-18.

⁸⁴ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology*. Vol. I: 120-1.

⁸⁵ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “On the Ontological Mystery”: 18.

dialectical movement towards transcendence. Poetry incorporates the dialectical negative (e.g., the non-being of the *Is-not*) within its affirmation of the positive (the being of *Is*). Mystery lays bare the ontological dimension of poetry to critical analysis while revealing, at the same time, the ground of being in its abyssal aspect to which it in turn points and upon which it depends. Typical of all mystery, poetry requires detachment or disengagement to be fully realized. But disengagement, we discovered, did not imply a denial of world or reader. Instead, disengagement was shown to be necessary in the affirmation of both world and our personhood, our Being-in-the-world. Here lies an important reason why a poem is established in its own exclusivity, aside from the extremely vacuous motto of early Modernism: “Art for art’s sake.” Alongside Marcel, I drew upon Tillich’s understanding of revelation, not merely because of his penetrating insight into Marceline mystery, but because *religious revelation* bears more than a passing resemblance to the revelatory affirmation at the very core of poetic experience. Poetry is itself intimately connected with a vocational event, the event of a poet’s creative vocation – I much prefer “creative vocation” to the more usual “creative process”, an overly mechanistic conception barely hinting at the ontology of all true creative activity. Finally, poetry fits in well with Tillich’s discourse on theological revelation, largely synonymous apart from Tillich’s insistence on *ultimate being* that is absolute in nature (poetry can also enter upon ultimate being). Poetic revelation is also coincident with what Northrop Frye called, in his studies of *The Bible*, the “kerygmatic”, deriving this term from Biblical exegesis and giving it a literary rather than a doctrinal value.⁸⁶ We shall explore this concept at length in subsequent chapters. Poetic revelation pivots upon the *pointing towards* that discloses both the mysterious *abyssal aspect* of the poem’s ever-present problematic and the mysterious *ground of being a being* to which the poem relates. Both these ontological dimensions are essential to mystery as the existential expansion of the *Is* and the *Is-not* underlying the interpretative paradox in the poetic metaphor.

⁸⁶ Northrop Frye (1990) *Words with Power*: 116.

The remarkable ability of poetry to say so much with so few words depends upon this fundamental mystery.

It was Northrop Frye who first acknowledged the presence of mystery in literature. Had he known of Gabriel Marcel's groundbreaking paper, he might have taken his discovery significantly further. Mystery makes possible *enrichment* and *affirmation*, both consequences of the interaction between meaning and the meaningful, between incompleteness and mystery. But more importantly, mystery prepares the ground for a more inclusive mode of description in *relation*. Ensuing chapters will enlarge upon these possibilities. To pave the way for our discussion of *enrichment*, we will paint a portrait of Francis Webb's second major poetic sequence *Leichhardt in Theatre*, a work that delights in the opportunities made available by poetic language, handling its metaphors confidently and with dexterity.

Wryly disclaiming all colonial pretensions, Webb attempts, here, a closer relation with his flawed central character than he did with absentee Ben Boyd but Leichhardt, nevertheless, remains a mystery at the mercy of forces deep within himself that will drive him, Ahab-style, to self-destruction but, perhaps, to a truly spiritual union with the land. The poetry explores the existential paradoxes underlying human identity, stripping away the colonial fictions of the age of exploration, to reveal a flawed human being at its heart as only poetry is capable. When we, to use Rudolf Bultmann's much-vaunted, or much-reviled, theological procedure, "demythologize" the colonial narrative, we are liable to cast its heroes into the shape of demonic or incompetent fools. Francis Webb, on the other hand, was far more sympathetic to his characters and attempted to see them for flawed but genuine human-beings they truly were. Heroes, even heroes with feet of clay, are genuinely human.

Case Study Chapter II

Leichhardt in Theatre

In *Leichhardt in Theatre*, published in 1952, Webb once again focuses upon a maligned figure that slipped in and out of Australian history; his last whereabouts remains unknown to this day, very much like Benjamin Boyd. Perhaps the absence of heroes and heroines marks the substantial reality of true legendary figures in Australia. Choosing explorers who return to oblivion brings the silence and devastation into focus as an existential question touching both poet and reader alike. The hero as actor, both as the one who enacts and motivates the annals of history, and as the actor “in theatre,” therefore, assumes a tragic status, *tragic* in the ancient Greek sense. The tragic hero, like Sophocles’ Oedipus, confronts the ontological paradoxes in himself, passing judgment while, knowing these paradoxes drive him to fulfil his destiny in confronting his desolation and ultimate unknown and anonymous death somewhere in the impossibly vast deserts of the Australian inland. And should we divine the metaphor in the hero’s action, the poet’s heroic action is to bring forth the hero and his confrontation with existential desolation, thereby calling upon the reader to grasp the poet’s tragedy and thus her or his own tragedy in the confrontation with desolation. Would that we could emulate both explorer and poet in living our own lives.

What seems most striking about *Leichhardt in Theatre* is the clear presence of the places in which the action occurs, not as some mere backdrop – i.e., the painted scenery sliding in from the fly-tower above the stage – but most impressively, as characters in the unfolding drama, the buildings themselves assume forbidding presence as “spatial history.”¹ The waxworks, the theatre and the room, where the explorer reflects and confronts the solidity of the paradoxes of being, are swept up into the tragedy as it wends its way towards its conclusion. What constitutes a “hero” is placed in the critical spotlight of the metaphorical tropes of display by which a hero identified.

¹W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 130.

Tropes of display

Leichhardt in Theatre opens with an ironical tour of a waxworks museum. This opening poem, however, was reinstated by Michael Griffith and James A. McGlade in *Cap and Bells* and does not occur in any edition before or after. History is so often presented as a sad and moth-eaten parade of waxen effigies, stiff and without life, as if there were some kind of infernal clockwork cranking out all relevant human action. The waxworks is crowded with an uninspiring grab-bag of exhibits gathering dust from neglect, the tour conducted by a caretaker who has neither interest in the exhibits nor in its patrons:

‘Press that red button to the left: they can talk, you know,’
The caretaker says, rubbing his nose; and so
We block his garrulous gullet with a shilling
As a white fish tossed to seal averts grunts and squealing.²

It isn’t an edifying exhibition. The spectators clearly eager to view some particular personage amongst all the wax-figures, pulled pell-mell from their historical contexts: Napoleon shoved up against Queen Victoria alongside a bushranger and a “genius” who murdered ten wives, “All inscrutable – worse, uninteresting.”³ Dutifully, the spectators press buttons hoping for movement from amongst the manikins, “A jerk or flexion of stiff, padded limbs /Working back towards life from his death-rattle of gears,” but they remain lifeless, empty, holding “its changeless impression of a cavern of glass [...] not even a pebble reflected on its walls.”⁴ Appearances of likeness are not sufficient to grant life to the statues. The effigies contain no ontological presence but the “impression of a cavern of glass,” a sense of non-being, possibly less, a sense of not even being that.

Amongst this petrified collection they finally come across the figure they seek, the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt: “The magnificent Doctor!” Leichhardt seems out of place amongst

² Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 57.

³ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 57.

⁴ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 57.

the other celebrities, uncomfortable with his fame or notoriety and wishing to stay hidden from the public gaze:

He yearned for this
Disdainful habit of anonymity
And wears it well, and – we should say, wears it well,
Perhaps – though perhaps a little insecurely? ⁵

Compared with Queen Victoria, commanding the ship of state to advance in her name, or the armoured Ned Kelly, holding his own against the knights of a forgotten empire, the Doctor seems to slip into the shadows away from the public spotlight. “Is it eyes he fears?” asks the poet, or the eyes of the gods: “A god turned meteorite, dead stone falling through space, /Dismembered galaxies.”⁶ Or does he fear classification? The tropes of display appropriate the person and reduce him to the dry discourses of historical function. But the spectators press the red button and all the doubts and fears of the explorer are swept away, “A coat of shadows discarded. Everything neat, /Impersonal, columnar.” The mechanical voice sets out the life history of Leichhardt in even tones without passion, but also without accomplishing the portrayal of the man himself, nothing of his loves, desires, shadows, guilt, doubts; the gaps telling us so much more about the man than this frozen, empty recitation. We might believe that “knowledge” of this kind with its even spaces and objective panorama is all that we need to reach the man and place him into his true historical milieu. But this is what Webb clearly wanted to disabuse us of; to turn our attention to what in us is unspoken and inarticulate. In the mirror of Leichhardt, like the mirror of Ben Boyd, we will see the silent centre untouched by the encircling vulture-like strategies of text and discourse.

After such a tawdry biography granted by the red button, Webb remonstrates with the reader, referring back to that dark Shakespearean tragedy *Hamlet*. Therein, the image of the distraught Prince pacing before the “headless bowmen” seeking a sign from heaven turns us from

⁵ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 58.

⁶ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 59.

the mechanism of the wax-museum to the human drama confronting the hideous truths that come out of the darkness:

Remember that palace in a fading State,
Hedged by gaunt panelling, rotted tapestries,
(Old lances shaken with the crannying wind).⁷

The remonstrating Prince “cries /His agony to a stunned and witless firmament, /For a sign, for a share.” But though he is commanding Heaven to clamour in sympathy with his feelings – “Clouds must swarm up – there must be lightning, lightning, /Drums in the bypath . . .” – only a servant girl watches him with unsympathetic eyes from the hidden darkness of a staircase. From her vantage point, the Prince’s gestures appear comical and inept, their fine theatricality reduced to the babblings of a madman in “twisted, foreign, abnormal syllables.”

This then is our dilemma, says the poet:

Which is pertinent:
Our Prince towering through anguish to purpose, or our Prince
Bombarding blockhead stars with curious words?
A singular problem. This, then, is the misfortune
Of the Prince and the Doctor. This is the Pantomime.⁸

The play, which we have been permitted to see, might be high art constructed from lyrical phrases and poetic metaphors of great power, or it might be comedic pantomime, a parody and absurd. But the dilemma seems to be in how we as the audience receive the play, expressed here along the lines of the contrasting masks of Greek theatre as over-inflated melodrama or as buffoonery, according to the spectator’s perceptions.⁹ That is the dilemma. The critical moment is revealed as a response in Webb’s thinking; the response of the spectator to the drama might be sympathetic or unsympathetic. It is certainly a public act. But the servant-girl crouching silently in the stairwell is not a public figure.¹⁰ She runs a critical eye over the histrionics unfolding on

⁷ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 59.

⁸ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 60.

⁹ Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 62-3.

¹⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 77.

stage, sometimes sympathetically, sometimes mockingly. Her position is invisible like all servants with personal access to all people. She, therefore, is the only figure who comes closest to the doctor in private and public.

The misfortune of the Doctor seems fated to reflect that of some pantomime Hamlet, played out upon a public stage and thrust indiscriminately into the public gaze. By employing the overall metaphor of the theatre, Webb situates his character in a place built for display. But how are we to read this? Is Webb presenting here an image of his poem? Does the poem occupy the same ontological dimensions of the portrayed theatre?

Poetry is fundamentally situational. The implicit frame around the poem functions in a very similar way to the line, a context marker, between audience and the proscenium of the stage. Yet here's the dilemma: while there exists a line between audience and play, the play is nothing without an audience. Theatre includes the audience, an ambiguity that is highlighted by Greek theatre, in which the questions asked by Oedipus of himself are also pertinent to his audience.¹¹ The spectator is as important to the play as the actors on the stage. We build special buildings to create, encompass and contain an audience for whom the display is presented. But the formation of a theatre wall of inclusion – the inclusion of the set group of people, actors and also their audience – also generates exclusion; those not granted admittance to the play. It has often been said that Webb's poetry is "difficult" and thus, it seems, those who are unable to gain admittance to the poetry for its hermeneutic difficulty will be thus formally excluded. However, it is poetry's difficulty that marks the text as specifically "literary." What its hermeneutical opacity implies is a necessity for *deliberation* by the reader. *Leichhardt in Theatre* automatically locates our hero into a metaphorical situation *by its title*. This situates the poem itself in the metaphor's mystery. The metaphor might be broken down into a set of problems, each answered by its attendant solution discourses, but still all these discourses will remain incomplete, either separately or all together. "*Leichhardt in Theatre*" is an affirmation of itself. This is where the

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 139.

poem stands; this is what the poem affirms. We will continue to release problems with their solutions from the ever-present mystery but poetic affirmation will continue to cut through these planes of interpretation. This is the true ground of a poem's difficulty. In the deliberation of the reader, interpretations are generated and then stripped away as we move towards the work's central affirmation and its mystery. Each layer of discourse projects the poetic affirmation onto a new dimension of meaning but the integrity of the poem continues to remain inviolate. Our dilemma is to recognize the mystery without explaining it away with our "giggles, tall tales, tonight in the servant's quarters."

But the wax-works is plainly not the theatre of the title. And although the overall impression of Leichhardt to date bears no semblance of the heroic ideal, indeed he is as decrepit as the shabby waxworks in which he appears, Webb gives a hint of his sympathy for doctor. Leichhardt doesn't quite belong amongst this decay. He attempts slipping back into the privacy of the shadow. Yet his display is fixed – too fixed – in place by the museum intended for the amusement of its patrons.

The second poem, "Advertisement", introduces the trope of the theatre at last. This is the first poem in the version of *Leichhardt in Theatre* published in all editions of the *Collected Poems*. The poem "Introduction in a Waxworks", originally part of "Leichhardt Pantomime", was placed in the anthology *Cap and Bells* but has been reinstated to its original context in the most recent *Collected Poems* of 2011.¹² The existential drama of *Leichhardt in Theatre* is largely missing from this poem and, from that point of view, it represents a critique of the public face of the explorer in the decrepit proscenium of history. With "Advertisement" the existential drama, taking place largely in tension with the public proscenium, has its beginning.

We are at the opening night. Dignitaries meet and shake hands; photographs line the foyer walls; inside the auditorium, beneath the obligatory chandelier, the audience buzzes with anticipation. Webb introduces a note of world-weariness in the audience. They will be hard to

¹² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 47-51.

please. The player is unknown to them and they have been promised a show filled with colour and drama and mystery:

An unknown leading-man will pace the boards and couple
Ships and counting houses in the ruby's monotone
With ruts and flames of antiquity buried in the opal.¹³

The poem recalls those fliers that were posted across town and handed out to passers-by, the theatre-staff touting for business. Halfway between a straight-out bill-poster and a favourable newspaper review – there are elements of both – it even describes the supporting act, coming on first to warm the audience up and whet their appetites before the main act. The explorer Sturt represents this support act on the bill:

The spotlight wanders about, falters for a moment on Sturt –
Senseless, the flare: he stands blazing in his own white world.
Light has rapped at his skull, flooded into his heart,
Shrivelled, consumed him.¹⁴

In the glare of the follow-spot, Sturt stands open before the audience who gaze on expectantly, all possibility of retreat cut off the moment the spotlight picks him out. He stands on display in the stark light for the entertainment of his audience. Yet the light also symbolizes the white-hot sun of the central-Australian desert. The glare pierces his skull to his very heart, changing him to light, the spiritual essence of Australia. We note how the audience witnessing this spectacle remains hidden in the anonymity of the darkened theatre. Their whole attention is focused upon the figure on stage. The public rostrum demands the explorer respond as the audience wishes, wowing it with tales of his bitter experiences searching for the [fabled] inland sea:

The inland sea. Yes! There were sea-length waves and surge,
Sand's arched and massive velocities topped with a foam of glitter;
And where sun grazed salt-glazed rock and the light's discharge
Circle its fabulous rings of tremor, there was water.¹⁵

¹³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 75.

¹⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 75.

Appearances of water in the hot desert can be mere mirages. Where he expected to find an inland sea, he only found sandy deserts mocking him with the mimicry of ocean waves and bringing death to one of their number: “Shall he tell them of Poole, of death?” The story told on the stage of Poole is a kind of resurrection of the dead but only to relive his death all-over again:

He will lie again
Racked by the light and the heat, dragged from his fortress of earth,
Burning and burning the bones that had long forgotten rain.¹⁶

There is a deep irony in these imaginings. To be entertaining, the explorer must engage his audience and not let their attention drift. The spectacle needs to be fulfilled and one feels the audience is merciless in its pursuit of diversion – the diversionary existence of Kierkegaard’s *aesthete*.¹⁷ Soon Sturt will be forgotten, because a new, more successful explorer will replace him in the public’s imagination. For him, exploration is a grave matter of life and death, of scientific research and expanding the knowledge of these unknown lands – “Fused-out, brittle the limbs, dazzled in darkness the stare /No rain will fall for Sturt. He burns back there.” But for his audience, their interest in his achievements will only last while there is still novelty and diversion to be gained from his story:

,

Impasse at the Centre. But the overture
Swings gallantly into stride: there are other roads,
Good country to the east. Flares dwindling now,
Flame spirited into smoke and lugged aloft
To swim uneasily for a space, like a pallid whale,
While oceanic shadows converge upon it.¹⁸

Does the “pallid whale” allude to *Moby Dick*, the “oceanic shadows” – the fabled inland sea – the seamen aboard the whaling-ship seeking to ambush and destroy him? Is this an ironical

¹⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 75.

¹⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 75.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 485-6.

¹⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 75-6.

reference to Ahab's monomania fixated upon the white whale, while Sturt fixated upon the inland sea, absurdly, stubbornly hauling a whaling boat along with his expedition? Certainly light is given a spiritual significance but for the expedition and for the audience in the theatre, the significance of this exploration is all smoke and mirrors. However, the scene has been set for the arrival of the main attraction. The audience await his appearance with bated breath. The curtain will rise, the audience expecting the "featured Merlin of the roads", a wizard to enchant them, to enrapture with his tales of adventure "from the loaded air of expectance." Sturt's *burning bush*, his holy fire, like the divine fire that surrounded St Francis and St Claire at Santa Maria degli Angeli,¹⁹ stands for the central spiritual significance of the Australian heartlands. But the audience – the Australian people – wants to be entertained not edified. So Sturt is passed over for the next celebrity explorer, who they hope will beguile them with stories of excitement and daring. Now the curtain rises. We are ready for Leichhardt to amuse us.

The dark pantomime

There are three voices in the second poem of the sequence, "Two on the map": that of Leichhardt himself, the folk rhyme of the servant girl, and venomous mockery from a menacing clown, a figure somewhat redolent of Nietzsche's demonic dwarf in *Zarathustra*.²⁰ The servant girl and the clown pass judgment upon the performance of Leichhardt from their very different perspectives. If this is a "pantomime" it is an extremely dark one, filled with foreboding and menace. Webb even gives us "stage directions" in square brackets to leave us in no doubt who speaks:

[*Leichhardt summons the elements. Impressive settings.*]

Honour, ambition, courage, rearing from madness

Three tablets for all to read.²¹

Instead of Moses bringing the tablets of the Decalogue down from Mount Sinai, Leichhardt draws from "madness" the three tablets of "Honour, ambition, courage." This Old

¹⁹Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria (1998) *The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi*: 32-34.

²⁰Friedrich Nietzsche (1969) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 47-8.

²¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 76.

Testament imagery draws a parallel between Moses, who came out of Egypt across the deserts of Sinai to the borders of the “Promised Land” where he disappeared into oblivion, and Leichhardt, who came out of Europe, crossing the deserts of Australia, and on his third expedition disappearing into oblivion like his prophetic forebear. Webb expands upon the religious significances with metaphors drawn from the Southern sky: the Southern Cross and its sister constellation, the so-called “False Southern Cross.” In the outstretched arms of the Southern Cross lies the promise of fulfilling his egoistic ends,²² as the old stars of Europe fade from view:

There were fresh stars
Lovely and cruciform, nor could butting winds
Ripple their snowy altitudes and calms,
Nor fretful clouds, blown fleece of circumstance,
Cling long to their widespread arms. Ambition, honour.²³

The explorer marks the bright Australian sun, “blinding streak through the hawse /That vehement cable!” Webb repeats the spiritual significance of the Australian light: “Courage in the glow, /So prodigal a battery of brilliance that the spirit /Might learn the ways of the sun.”²⁴ Compared to this bright, sunny land, full of promise, the lands of Europe he left behind are dark, “horizonless” and without possibility. Everything there has been achieved, nothing is left to explore. The poet tells us that Leichhardt found in Europe a dreadful ennui, a land and its people worn down by despair:

Always the drifting eyes
Around me seeking something, in named houses,
Libraries, monuments, in the riddle of the old mirror:
But finding nothing, book nor laboured stone
Nor glass that had not known the famished eyes
Year after year.²⁵

²² W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*:131.

²³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 76.

²⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 76.

²⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 76.

In a line worthy of Walt Whitman, Webb announces the new possibilities to be found in the deserts and mountains and precipices of Australia: “Southward the new, the visionary!” In this land, “man becomes a myth,” he attains heroic status being claimed by the natural world. Leichhardt approaches an apotheosis of being human, rather than in “mere life” bound to the lassitude of his European past.²⁶ There is a clear reference to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* and the *Übermensch*, striding across the desert, the mountains, facing terror and peril; achieving beauty, shedding all disfigurement, the past and dishonour.²⁷ In fact, all the dimensions of the weak who gather as a “rabble” mirror Zarathustra’s disdain for the mere “human” crowd.²⁸ But Webb is far from condoning the philosophy of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*²⁹ for the dominant Australian symbol. Indeed, by employing the imagery of “famished eyes,” the *Übermensch* is beheld for what he truly is: a product of the same despair and ennui from which Leichhardt escaped. Yet his eyes reflect their European birthplace as any other native of that continent. Moreover, the indigenous people of Australia are removed from contention by a vast arrogance that dismisses their understanding of the land – “the dark hunters /Are eyeless and incurious as death, /Mountain, or precipice”³⁰ – replacing it with the legend of the heroic explorer, standing alone against the onslaught of the elements. Webb has subtly captured the deep irony in the Nietzschean ethic as it is advocated by the Lindsay set.³¹ For all their justification of an Australian egalitarianism, on the one hand, and to a native-born character, theirs’ is as European as the philosopher who gave birth to the *Übermensch*.

The servant girl serves as the first leveller of this overblown egoism with her ignorant – or innocent – eye: “The funny old leader of the pantomime!” She watches the dance of Leichhardt as one would a music-hall performer, rather quaint and comical but an anachronism, a tatty romantic figure from a bygone era:

²⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 77.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche (1969) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 88-9.

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche (1969) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 120-22.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche (1969) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 42ff.

³⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 77.

³¹ Michael Griffith (1989) “Francis Webb and Norman Lindsay”: ?

He mounts like Quixote on a spavined old nag
That couldn't kick the slogan from a sugar bag.
He mayn't know north from south, but he's clever
At playing with windmills in the Never-Never.
Off! With a cooee and ribald song,
Near stirrup short, of stirrup long.³²

From a mocking eye, the great visionary is brought to his knees, his gigantic egoism defunct. Yet the image we gain from the servant girl is not of unkindness, for all that. She holds the old explorer in affection although she has debunked his legendary stature and his heroic dreams. He is ill-equipped and ridiculous, appearing as a Don Quixote, but the figure of the aged knight is entirely sympathetic nonetheless. We care for him as much as we mock him. We admire his bravery no matter how ill-founded. And in recognizing Leichhardt as a Quixote, the servant girl, also a figure of ridicule in Cervantes's time, is genuinely ennobled by the fading hero, just like the servant girl ennobled simply because of the treatment she receives from the Don.

From the audience there is "disapproval and murmuring (at this point)." At first I thought the murmurs of disapproval were aimed at the servant girl. But it is clear that the servant girl belongs to the audience herself, albeit crouching on the stairway. In many respects, the picture the crowd has of Leichhardt is similar to the girl's, though perhaps a little less sympathetic. She is more like the ludicrous but down-to-earth Sancho Panza,³³ who reluctantly follows his Don Quixote although he has a more realistic perception of reality, a reality desperately in need of re-enchantment.

Responding to the crowd's murmurs, the third character in our pantomime, all "besmeared with flour and ketchup," a clown, perhaps intended to be the butt of our mockery, lollops forth from the wings to harangue the audience. The clown's harangue is filled with menace; he is *death* riding the backs of all who mock; he is the sinister fool who discloses the

³² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 78.

³³ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 64.

sordid truths of existence, from which none escapes; he is bathos and pathos, the two conflicting masks of Greek theatre, jeering at tragedy and hypocrisy; he is a demonic Yorrick returned from the grave to hound us in our waking hours:

So all of you, my friends, have conquered laughter,
The creased and monstrous painted effigy
That sags and billows behind you: at the bench,
The typewriter, in the shaving-mirror?
You may write words or ride in omnibuses,
Give lectures, name a river, kill a man,
But always the obscene, the senseless titter
Tenses your shoulder blades.³⁴

The greatest leveller of all, death mocks the explorer: “Give lectures, name a river, kill a man.” But it also mocks his audience, including the reader and the poet himself: “always the obscene, the senseless titter.” Should you respond by trying to silence death’s laughter, all you receive is more laughter: “There’s no violence /Can silence laughter.” So, instead of rejecting it, the clown calls on us to laugh, to jeer along him:

Turn on it in ugly mimic carnival,
Guffaw and shout and stamp until your voice
Cuts off its air, splinters its blinking eyes,
Till its head rolls off to a corner, and its powers
Settle like chains tossed down –
But no, friends. This is Leichhardt, known as the Doctor.³⁵

Leichhardt the explorer, doctor, hero, clown or Quixotic buffoon, all mark not the person as a human being but how the displayed figure is constructed within public discourses, aptly caught by Webb in the structural metaphor of the theatre. This surreal nightmare is fixed in place by the hermeneutical judgment informed by horizons of display and public spectacle. But even the unity of horizons, proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer,³⁶ will not deliver up the person. He

³⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 78.

³⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 78.

³⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer (2002) *Truth and Method*: 300-305.

remains as distanced as ever. But this inviolate core will stay hidden while the man struts on the stage. Only when we meet him face-to-face will the possibility of true knowledge ensue. The poet has no more access to the man than anyone else. It is to Webb's credit that he again makes this fact the central axis around which his second poetic sequence spins. But unlike his treatment of Boyd, Webb transfigures the mystery of ignorance into the poetic mystery of the man and his relation to the land to which he has come. As Webb cannot appropriate Leichhardt's place in historical fact, he responds to the enigma in humility – Webb treats his subject both satirically, in shining a torch upon social discourses of hero and buffoon, and sympathetically, by realizing and giving voice to human finitude and fallibility, especially his own, and from this generating poetry of great lyricism.

Tragedy and the death of Gilbert

Leichhardt's first expedition journeyed from Moreton Bay (Brisbane) to Port Essington (on the Gulf of Carpentaria), a distance of some 3,000 miles. When the expedition turned up in Sydney, the colony was taken by surprise. They had been given up for dead. But only one man, John Gilbert the English ornithologist, was killed. In consequence of his achievement as leader of the expedition, Leichhardt became an overnight celebrity. Webb's poem employs here metaphors derived from ancient Egypt – the Egypt from which Moses brought the children of Israel – to situate his explorers back in the museum of the dead:

The ten men camp in a night that is like some day
Haled from a sunken world, stripped of mummy-cloths,
With years and decay about it for dusk and shadows.³⁷

Signs of the approaching Underworld were there for all to read had they been given the skill. The two Aborigines with the expedition recognized the signs and lagged behind the Europeans. Although unable to read the omens, the Europeans still sensed with foreboding the coming onslaught. So too their horses: "The horses stumbled, stumbled, /Spattered with lather –

³⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 79.

strange after such a journey.”³⁸ The cicadas stop trilling, so suddenly that the silence was filled with a violent afterimage of sound. Foreboding charges the air. “The kindly buffs and greens, stone-colour and tree, /Wilted before a slate-grey, driving phalanx.” All the usual pleasantness of nature retreated before the changing weather, the changing fortune, the wheel of fate, from life to a prescience of death: “Life was gone from the mountains.” Death creeps ever closer:

Back of the lagoon
Anubis pricks his dingo’s ears. His cry
Balances the thought of light and darkness. Vigilant
Among stars like amulets
Crawls the flat gold scarab of the moon.³⁹

The moon resurrects after three days in the darkness like Jesus Christ. The scarab, the dung beetle, is an Egyptian religious symbol for rebirth. Combining symbols of death and of rebirth in a single figure, Webb marks both the foreboding of death but also the hope for resurrection, perhaps resurrection from this state of dark forewarnings. The amulets of the stars are also a sign of hope, if only a desire, worn to ward off evil, rather than certainty. The focal events⁴⁰ of the poem, the death of Gilbert and the attainment of the expedition’s object, the Gulf of Carpentaria, are related by this single conception combining death and resurrection. Gilbert appears especially fragile in the harsh, unforgiving landscape, like the flowers he tenderly plants and protects, cradling them in his hands “like diamonds,” precious indeed.⁴¹ When the decamped expedition is ambushed by a party of Aborigines, Gilbert alone is killed but it seems as if the very land itself has reclaimed him:⁴²

Too late the countering omen of gunfire. Change
Has trampled the fire to embers: Gilbert is dead.
And the sheer, marvellous speed that left no haft
Clinging in its passage, stamped him back to earth,

³⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 79.

³⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 79.

⁴⁰ Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 65.

⁴¹ Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 65.

⁴² Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 66.

His eyes wide open, gravel on his mouth,
Bleeding no more than one of his flowers might bleed:
This in his place.⁴³

As in death: so in rebirth. Reversing the Biblical birth of Adam, the death of Gilbert seems a profoundly spiritual act, even if brutal in deed and outcome, a sacrifice to the land and its people. The expedition finally reached its goal. The Gulf opens out before them through a gap in the hills. At this distance the green seaweed and the white foam of waves cannot be seen, “But the Gulf flooded superbly at the wilted root; /Freshness nuzzled them; they /Forgot the gall and harness, were at leisure /Or, as the gulls, part and parcel of the sea.”⁴⁴ The expedition is resurrected from its despair, its sickness unto death.⁴⁵

Leichhardt is feted as a hero by colonial society. After Sturt’s failure to locate an inland sea, the colony is badly in need of good tidings, of business opportunities to bring the colony growth, instead of just clinging to the edges of the continent. The self-interest of colonial egoism creates a heroic legend around the doctor’s exploits, to which Leichhardt initially turns a blind eye. Consequently, his silence feeds the population’s adulation, transfiguring him from a simple, ordinary man into the image of the *Übermensch*, the monstrous mirror of egoist desire:

This may be landfall. In the faces of women,
Their gracious sidelong eyes, he reads his own
Transfiguration, his solar permanence;
And their narcotic murmurs connote bronze:
Leichhardt, enormous, seen from the passing coaches,
Striding above tree-level.⁴⁶

Hardly exempt from falling under the spell of this shallow adulation, from accepting the acclaim that promises him eternal glory as bronze statuary, built to last centuries, Leichhardt eventually succumbs to the fantasy.⁴⁷ But the people are as fickle as they are unable to appreciate

⁴³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 80.

⁴⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 81.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 17ff.

⁴⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 81-2.

⁴⁷ Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 66.

subtleties of nature that point to deeper truths. The explorer, however, continues to attend to the still, small voice within that speaks of another reality; meanings with a completely different agenda from that of hubris. Webb's natural theology pokes through the din of public acclaim, quickly, quietly and with the same subtlety to which he alludes and withdrawing, as easily forgotten:

If a seeming trivial thing,
Conflict of colours in a particular dawn,
Divided shimmer of pyrites on stone,
Or frosty spinet of a bird's call, holding a clue,
Trailing a thread of lure – if something was missed,
Forgotten . . .⁴⁸

Ludwig Leichhardt revealed his lyrical side in his journal, that part of him that now lies forgotten in the clamour of flattery and worldly acclaim. This poetic lyricism provides “the antidote to Leichhardt's grandiosity; momentarily it opens a door to a reality that exists beyond the theatrical and mythical role.”⁴⁹ But the existential door to poetic lyricism is closed to Leichhardt, its fragility, like that fragile figure of Gilbert, ground into the dust of amnesia. When the lyrical re-emerges into the consciousness of Leichhardt, it returns to denounce the explorer. Like the Ancient Mariner, or the Wandering Jew, he will be condemned to wander Australia for eternity.

Lampooning the hero

However, eventually Leichhardt came to believe the public adulation. In consequence, in his second expedition proves to be a monumental disaster that will tarnish his heroic status. Ironically, it was this very false image that lay behind the escalating mayhem. The leader's ineffectual attempts at preventing this ill-fated expedition from descending into chaotic burlesque stood to no avail. His public image will plunge from hero to buffoon:

Burnish the shield

⁴⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 82.

⁴⁹ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 68.

Till it flames, fit mate for the sun; deck six and twelve
With proclamation, seize the discarded trumpet
Whose song is the heart's flush, surge of the blood;
And whisk away these caltrop treacheries
Of inaction, evil sown thickly in the road.
Press back the loud camp followers.⁵⁰

He rides forth as the warrior, his "shield" burnished to reflect the sun, with "his stern and silent angels: Courage, Ambition." Yet, like the lean Don Quixote, one senses the absurdity of this explorer, a figure of tardy accolades but also the butt of humour: "[*The bruit of the approach drowns in a backstage babel.*]"⁵¹

From the first, things go wrong. Leichhardt is kicked by a stray bullock: "The bullock stays behind."⁵² The bullock staying behind strikes an immediate comic note. The baggage mules scatter while being unloaded. The animals seem to be running riot, undermining the expedition's leadership. At its head, Leichhardt resorts to theatrical oratory to regain order. But this has no effect upon the unruly animals and we are left in considerable doubt whether his leadership can be imposed on the expedition. The comic note is struck again: "In a welter /Of tea and under linen the Doctor makes a speech."⁵³ The poem is articulated by the increasingly comic figure of the Doctor holding forth as the situation grows more and more ridiculous, more and more burlesque, writing worthy of Spike Milligan:

The cattle and sheep stampede
Again and again, and unofficial miles
Are notched up in hardship. A vapid trickle of fever
Seeps into the men: they brandish at each other
Dulled edges of words. The Doctor makes a speech
And Providence, hostile leaguer, stands unmasked,
Slouches off in the rain, gnashing teeth. The intrepid Doctor
Is kicked by several mules.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 82.

⁵¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 82.

⁵² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 82-3.

⁵³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 83.

⁵⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 83.

Eventually the animals depart on an expedition “of their own sponsoring”, as the men break down under the strain of sickness and starvation. Then Leichhardt is caught with his undignified hand in the sugar-bag:

Bailed up,
Roundly asserts his duties to Australia
And the men, extols the dignified doom of sugar
Replacing energies that leadership
Must dissipate. He makes another speech.
The expedition sinks to a watery grave.⁵⁵

This episode furnishes Webb with the opportunity to display his talent for comic invention. One might have titled the poem: “The revenge of the mules.” Their rebellion discloses the absurdity of human hubris while bringing the transfigured hero, the warrior Übermensch, down to the earthy fundament of mules. All desire falters at the threshold of actuality. Leichhardt returns home in disgrace. Compared to the first expedition, which through its hardships attains its goal and its leader much-applauded, the second expedition sinks as it began: In mockery, returning its leader a laughingstock, all its hardships unacknowledged by a scornful audience. In the annals of human achievement, there are many such ill-fated attempts when hubris presages a fall from grace. But the response of the Shakespearean hero, such as Henry V, in delivering a stirring speech in the face of imminent disaster, proves to be a failure in reality, especially in the wake of such parody.

Solitude and despair

In *The Room* we are ostensibly returned to a domestic setting, in which the spirited defender can no longer hide from himself. This at first appears to be a pause in the pantomime, a time for reflection, quite literally as Leichhardt gazes at himself in a mirror contemplating his folly. Perhaps the room is a backstage dressing room. However, although this passes as a hiatus in the pantomime, Webb presents it as the set piece for a soliloquy. We have not left the stage, after all. Rather, following the slapstick of the second expedition, the stage-lights dim, the hero

⁵⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 83.

stands framed in the mirror, we step from bathos to pathos, from absurd exploit to serious stillness, from the ribald buffoonery of Falstaff to the reflective solitude of Hamlet:

The neat montage
Of flawless lamplight gathers in his movements;
Exact, predictable as waves, his thoughts
Shatter themselves between the bedstead's knuckles.
Therefore we bring the Doctor to this room.⁵⁶

The setting provides the perfect counterpane to the drama that is to be played out between its walls. Its interior space mirrors the thoughts of the man. He cannot hide from himself here; the barque of adulation and self-regard, that came adrift upon the reefs of parody and self-abnegation, is exposed to critical examination in this reality; he confronts himself.⁵⁷ As existentialists such as Paul Tillich would say, the good doctor stands in a state of *anxiety* which has no object or, more specifically, "its object is the negation of every object."⁵⁸ Any participation, struggle or love is impossible beneath its reign. Those in anxiety are delivered into it without possible rescue. It is in every case an existential state of power and dread that overwhelms its victims without recourse to the usual consolations granting escape from its clutches:

Helplessness in the state of anxiety can be observed in animals and humans alike. It expresses itself in loss of direction, inadequate reactions, lack of "intentionality" (the being related to meaningful contents of knowledge or will.) The reason for this sometimes striking behaviour is the lack of an object on which the subject (in the state of anxiety) can concentrate. The only object is the threat itself, but not the source of the threat, because the source of the threat is "nothingness".⁵⁹

Peering long into the mirror, the Doctor sees himself "as for the first time, stained and vulnerable, /Branded with whispers."⁶⁰ He begins by defending himself, the standard practice of

⁵⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 84.

⁵⁷ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 73.

⁵⁸ Paul Tillich (1962) *The Courage to Be*: 45.

⁵⁹ Paul Tillich (1962) *The Courage to Be*: 45.

⁶⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 84.

blaming others for his plight, until mocking laughter from behind forces him to stop these ridiculous evasions. The source of the threat is “nothingness”; she, the servant girl in her stairwell, who mocks him, remains hidden: “Always withdrawn, the enigmatic thing.” Yet, paradoxically, as his Sancho Panza she is also something much more mysterious: perhaps his conscience or what Sigmund Freud would have called his “Reality Principle,” forcing us to confront the unmasked face, presented as we really are in this mirror self. Both public accolade and derision fall away before this truth of a man facing himself, revealing himself as himself, as if for the first time. The enigmatic presence serves to cut away all the evasions that prevent the explorer seeing his true self: And in beholding his true self, we the readers, are called upon to do just that for ourselves. Self-reflection holds a mirror to the reader for the dark, hidden presence of the servant girl stands behind us all:

Always withdrawn, the enigmatic thing
That mocks him: once with lineaments of water,
Again, a girl’s face, or a monument,
But no semblance, ache without the symbol
– Or a gaunt symbol, to be shuddered from.⁶¹

Webb brings a fearful quality to her enigma. We do not know whether this is really a person, or a ghost, or, as Homer puts it, “the horror took me that Perséphonê /had brought from darker hell some saurian death’s head.”⁶² That this might also be Death is implied by the fragile figure of Gilbert returning to haunt Leichhardt:

Moves to the window, stares at eddying dust,
And thinks of dust. Of Gilbert. The pale face
Stamped by the marvellous speed, and covered quickly
Because the eyes were open, shows itself.
Has Gilbert found the source? or do his bones,
Forever at war with death,
Trudge nightly towards Port Essington, till dawn

⁶¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 84.

⁶² Homer (1990) *The Odyssey*. Tr. Robert Fitzgerald. Bk. 11, ln. 753-4: 206.

Chains them again in stone?⁶³

Certainly there is fear but Gilbert's open eyes might bear a dreadful knowledge from which none can awaken: "A question stares /Relentless from the dust, the answer traces /Legends of fright upon his brain." Returning to the mirror, the explorer sees the work of fright, of dread, upon his visage as the question eats its way through to his heart: "And he must answer."⁶⁴ That bald line penetrates to the core of the man from out of existence itself: A response to which all must give thought. His attempts to turn aside from what was demanded of him simply appear lame. No evasion will enable escape from this dreadful predicament. The moment of reckoning has come. How shall he answer? It seems as if the land itself is demanding a response. The earth and death are ancient bedfellows in the dust that combines them both. That forgotten lyricism has returned wearing the mask of death. The question is momentous and its demand strips the explorer naked before its deep existential accusation:

Wash of darkness
Save for three shining things. The Furies circle:
Desert with bleached eyes, mountain with the hawk's mouth,
Sea with her witching falseness; cordon him.
He is taken, stripped, and bound.⁶⁵

These Australian Furies – desert, mountain, sea – the three shining things, characterizes the blood-guilt of the explorer from the heart of this treacherous land. Just as Oedipus faced the dread Furies in their sacred copse at Colonna and was dragged into oblivion, so Leichhardt has been called and set upon by the Australian Furies of desert, mountain and sea. The man is betrayed by his own sense of guilt, burdened by the accusation levelled at him from the dust, from the land and from what it represents: the murder of Gilbert. He cannot escape this condemnation because it comes from within himself.

Here the passion-play of archetypes returns to Leichhardt that sense of lyricism banished by the vehement aridity of public adulation, but it returns as retribution for which Leichhardt will

⁶³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 84.

⁶⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 85.

⁶⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 85.

ultimately pay with his life. The subtlety of Webb's allusions can be grasped by the concluding line of *The Room*, "He is taken, stripped, and bound," which is clearly an allusion to Christ's passion.⁶⁶ Leichhardt transfigured from buffoon to sacrifice by acknowledging his guilt and humility in the confrontation with the sublime. He will depart on his third and final expedition in this knowledge, not to conquer the land but to fulfil his destiny in becoming one with it in the way that was prepared by the death of Gilbert. Joining with the land is the only way to expiate his dread burden of guilt for both Gilbert's death and for his acquiescence in the face of tawdry acclamation.

Webb's language retrieves the land from the false domination of the heroic legend by employing a trope from Greek mythology, the *Erinyes*, the Furies, given identity in the body of the Australian landscape. These demons reflect the European confrontation with the stark reality of this unforgiving, yet fragile land, the awful beauty of its bitter sublime, against which European sensibilities remain alien and dislocated in stooping to conquer and dominate. The land will pass judgment upon our claims to heroic domination. Death, failure and guilt will accompany us wherever we aim to settle in Australia. Had the explorer maintained his own lyrical sense of its awful beauty, rather than acceding to public acclaim with its attendant narcissism, he might have freed himself from the coming torments. This is the central truth of Webb's poetic sequence and it is meant as a lesson for us all, not merely as a commentary on Leichhardt. Barrenness and dislocation is the destiny of all who stagger forth in the presumption of the false idolatry within their narcissism. The warrior is defeated by hubris. Confronting the desolation requires profound humility, grace and insight though death is the result.

The spiritual dimension of oblivion

Six months after the disastrous burlesque of the second expedition, Leichhardt sets out again upon his last ill-fated expedition to retrieve the journey that was reduced to folly by the rampaging mules. After travelling inland from the Darling Downs, the expedition disappeared

⁶⁶ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 74.

without a trace. Webb's language is highly lyrical as if something important has been achieved, even though the party is doomed. Here the mystery of Leichhardt is reclaimed by the poet's lyricism, not by raising another heroic effigy but by grasping the spirit of land and person. This spirit is portrayed by the mystery at the centre of poetry, at the centre of *this* poetry. We are reclaiming the gap between world and words, the shadow between the conception and the creation, between emotion and response, that so captivated Eliot:⁶⁷

Snapped wire jabs at the wind: the gate is down:
Where some bribed fearful entry no one guards.
The sphinx upon the capital is known.
Around the gateway footprints, ruts are found.
Men meet here now, quiet on familiar ground.⁶⁸

This enigmatic lyricism holds a secret to its heart. The riddle of the Sphinx, that “flinty singer” dominating Sophocles’ tragedy of identity, *Oedipus the King*, is brought to bear here: “What is it that walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs in the afternoon and on three legs in the evening; is strongest when it has least and weakest when it has most?” The answer given by Oedipus, “man”, does not answer the riddle in any depth for the riddle asks much more of him: “What is man? What is Oedipus?”⁶⁹ By alluding to the sphinx, Webb reflects upon the man that is Leichhardt, who, like Oedipus, illegitimately gained entrance to the city. The gateway where they gather is now unguarded by the vanquished sphinx. But its presence is still apparent. Leichhardt is a man again. He has fallen from his public pedestal. He bears the burden of his guilt, knowing it to be true, again like the fallen Oedipus. He accepts full responsibility for himself, no longer blames others for his own failings, and has achieved authenticity of being. The men meet at the gateway, quietly, without the absurd accoutrements of the warrior, without the brazen fanfare of false idolatry. They are “quiet on familiar ground.” The ruts from the failed

⁶⁷ T. S. Eliot (1963) *Collected Poems*: 92.

⁶⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 85.

⁶⁹ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 124.

second expedition are still there, a reminder of their past follies. This is a real reconciliation with the land, available only when the false idols of egoism are shed. They have found poetry:

Study the carved wood and the stirrup leather,
Debris and trifles matched against your skill:
These are no fragments you may wedge together,
Animate, summon by name, equip with will:
Let what is waste lie waste; yield to the pressure
And silence of their fate. World, words, are closer.⁷⁰

The lyrical poetry of their authentic existence transcends the machinations of fate. The expedition is riding out to its death, but though this is certain, it has no power to generate the heroic legends as it had done so before. Neither does it have the power to throw its fallen hero into the slough of despond nor turn him into a buffoon, the butt of rumour and jibe. Perhaps one catches a faint whisper of John Bunyan's Mr Valiant-for-truth quoting Paul as he crossed the river to Paradise: *"Death, where is thy sting?" And as he went down deeper, he said, "Grave, where is thy victory?" So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.*⁷¹

It is where sun and world blossom into words
As a tree's lovely frenzies of bloom divide
Winter from winter, month from month of birds:
In such clean space the man and his shadow ride.
See them upon the hills, life-sized and breathing,
Where will they go, how perish – this is nothing.

The shadow in the stairwell, the shadow of condemnation is transfigured from dread death to poetic destiny. She rides beside Leichhardt, like him "life-sized and breathing." The grandiose narcissism of the egoist hero, the false idolatry of the *Übermensch*, was finally vanquished when the explorer accepted himself with all his faults, his responsibility and his guilt. Leichhardt rides out of the straitjacket of history altogether. His speech is the speech of lyricism.

⁷⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 86.

⁷¹ John Bunyan (1862) *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 363.

In the direction away from the wind, leeward, in the place of stillness, the still small voice of poetry does not have to fight to be heard above the storm:

Think back to leeward. Lyrical's the speech,
The hang, the sway of a lithe wave as it climbs
To tug at a cloud dangling rope of beach
Till air fills with the long wings of chimes.
All that is life comes here. Beyond the gates
Only storm, drowned things, rock in the surly straits.⁷²

The dramatic form of the earlier poems in the cycle gives way to the lyrical form of the last. Certainly this is not just a lack of discipline on the part of the poet. On the contrary, this is entirely the point to which we have come. With drama comes marching onto the stage all the stock characters of the twin masks: the tragic hero and the comedic buffoon. What the lyric of the last poems achieves is true revelation of the complexity of character and mystery wherein redemption lies. Here world and word are “closer.” That is, the mystery of person and world is granted speech in the metaphors and allusions of poetry. Poetic metaphor holds its own mystery and thus closes the gap between being and Word. The mystery of one discloses the mystery in the other, which is its possibility. But how else are we to affirm in word that which steps up to us and calls to be affirmed? Affirmation is a calling forth and a standing firm in that calling. The lyrical, for Webb as it was for Coleridge, is that calling and the standing-firm in the calling. This is its ontological value and its great promise. And the reader must be able to respond to that calling and to be able to stand firm in its mystery, or the poetry itself is broken.

Epilogue in the wasteland

We are told that this poem, the last of the sequence in *Cap and Bells* (reintegrated with its original context in the *Collected Poems* of 2011), is “spoken, in main, by the Age, the Servant girl, /The author arguing with both, as is usual.”⁷³ There is something of Eliot’s *Wasteland* in

⁷² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 86.

⁷³ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 72. Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 51.

Webb's depiction of the empty theatre strewn with litter as its audience crowds out onto the streets:

The theatre is empty: papers and peanut-shells
Litter the aisles, and now the lights are out.
People crowd in the streets; sirens are blowing;
Headlights pour together, they splash and swill
On the hard glaze of the road, forward, back;
Light playing on light, as cataract
Toppling on water.⁷⁴

The imagery of the rubbish littering the theatre is metaphorically transferred outside to the interplay of car-headlights that “splash and swill” over the shiny-surface of the road. By comparing the visual confusion caused by the lights connecting rubbish in the theatre with the simile of a “cataract /Toppling on water,” we understand the chaos caused by the selfishness and carelessness of the people, out only for an evening's entertainment. This is the real condition of the Age. Passing through this degradation, an unconcerned figure – the contrasting self-styled propaganda of the Age – reflects the heroic fable, hollow and unconnected to the true reality of people's lives. Employing prosopopoeia, Webb personifies the Age to realize the sham he believes it to be:

A slender fuselage
Skims, cool and unhurried, through the shabby clouds,
Independent of the night, the shadows of the Great
Cowering on their pedestals.⁷⁵

The Age has constructed its idea of Leichhardt in an image of itself.⁷⁶ But the self-possessed man, who rode off with his shadow, is absent from this figure. The “fuselage” refers to the long barrel shape of an aeroplane, smooth and streamlined and constructed of shining metal flying through the “shabby clouds.” With a single word, “fuselage,” Webb recalls the entire commercial edifice of advertising; a machine erecting unreal effigies of desire. The Age speaks,

⁷⁴ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 72.

⁷⁵ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 72.

⁷⁶ Michael Griffith (1991) *God's Fool*: 71.

casting Leichhardt as a subject of entertainment, like a hollow ventriloquist's doll, to be discarded when worn-out:

Come out, good Doctor,
Misshapen maniac! Come out and blink
With sad extravagance. Walk up and down!
Mumble your specious part, rave into the night
With honour, courage, ambition – matted madness,
While the wind plucks at your crazy hair, while the light
Runs in and out of our head. You are bric-a-brac,
A child's worn doll. Hollow. Falling to pieces.
So much for the Age.⁷⁷

The second voice, the servant girl, returns us to the street, a street of lights and mocking laughter; a street filled with thoughtless revellers living in the shallow chaos, the world of the Wasteland. Here, there seems little chance of that thoughtful reflection that marked Leichhardt so heavily and enabled him to re-connect with his own authenticity, like the Wedding Guest in Coleridge's *Rime*, who rose the morrow morn, a "sadder and a wiser man." This servant girl is also a product of her times:

But I imagine rain,
Rain over the lights over laughter and pointing fingers.
Scientist, herdsman, assassin, caught without shelter,
Cupped under, dowsed. Lights scuttling in all directions
Like haunted spiders; landing beams switched on,
Chatter of panic in the wireless.⁷⁸

She continues to see in Leichhardt the "funny old leader of the pantomime," a figure of amusement, of parody, of caricature, somebody to be mocked, jeered at, cruelly and without sympathy. The author, on the other hand, contradicts these false attributes. There is, he says, a lingering doubt, even here on the street, a barest hint of that subtle essence of being, that had

⁷⁷ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 72.

⁷⁸ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 72.

been once forgotten by Leichhardt to his great cost. Even should laughter mark our passing, the doubt lies in the idea we cannot capture the many-sides of who we are:

Agreed that laughter
Will be the last of us some time or other;
Have it not snickering but many-sided:
Flares, sawdust, declamation, Catherine wheels.⁷⁹

Flares of fire; sawdust from which the puppet is made; declamation, the art of the actor's rhetoric, Catherine wheels, spinning exuberantly, brightly turning on the still centre at its hub. Webb does not blatantly contradict the grandiloquence of the Age or the servant girl's simple-mindedness. He gently but purposively demurs, pointing to the small gesture of the lyrical; the small way of the Fool, announced in Webb's early poem *Cap and Bells*.⁸⁰ That this has the power to bring us to our own sense of being against the overbearing noise of the Age is a profound mystery. It provides an answer to Hölderlin's problem: "Of what use is a poet in a destitute time?" What makes the time destitute is its lack of poetic lyricism. This is Francis Webb's answer: Poetry is his answer.

What we have witnessed here in this extraordinary cycle of poems is the intertwining of *meaning*, from the incompleteness plane, with the *meaningful* from the plane of mystery. Wherever a meaning is outlined, in metaphor or allusion, its application to being and existence is immediately made apparent and, therefore, shown to be meaningful. Each meaning adds to the extent in which poetic mystery comes into presence. The meaningful projects onto the plane of meaning and emerges as a single figure, like a form emerges from the three-dimensions of space. I call this intertwining of meaning with the meaningful "enrichment" because it bears all the hallmarks of existential enrichment. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

⁷⁹ Francis Webb (1991) *Cap and Bells*: 72.

⁸⁰ Francis Webb (2011) "Cap and Bells" *in* Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 17.

Theory Chapter III

On enrichment: the quest for authenticity

Work and silence inching, with the minute-hand
– Francis Webb.

In increasingly inclusive modes of dialectical description, we have encountered the phenomenon of poetic indeterminacy described in two quite different, yet related, ways. This chapter will describe one consequence of the interconnection between these two dialectical modes of description. Because each interpretation that promotes plurivocity still retains the question it was aiming to solve, it entails the same *pointing* into the mystery of the poem that is occasioned by the poem itself. Where we heed the call to allow the meaning thus constructed to point into the mystery, the meaning points into that meaningful centre, therefore, rendering the *meaning meaningful*. It is this meaning made meaningful that I term “enrichment”. Enrichment returns our attention to the reader whose life, whose living reality, becomes enriched by the meaning made meaningful. Existence based solely upon critical discourse in its rationalist phase might fail to notice the meaningful and, consequently, fail to grasp enrichment, unless there come into its favour being’s mystery, which it has difficulty in conceiving for a mystery revealed is a mystery in presence.

Incompleteness, the first description of poetic indeterminacy, keeps well within the critical realm wherein disciplines such as semantics, semiotics and most of hermeneutics (except, as stated above, the tendency of hermeneutics towards an openness to mystery and to being) properly establish themselves. Although these disciplines share many ideas and parallels in common, they cannot simply be equated. However, collectively each represents an application of critical discourse to the question of the poetic text, being inscribed by strict metaphysical presumptions. For example, they presume the convergent hermeneutic circle which aims to reduce ambiguity to univocal meaning. Univocal meaning inscribes all being within an *enframing* (*Ge-stell*) – the term comes from Heidegger¹ – thereby jettisoning anything that

¹ Martin Heidegger (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology*: 19-21.

diverges from this pattern. That critical discourse resists this univocity and its enframing, against its own tendency, reveals the extent to which critical discourse defies concentration into a purely technical language.

Occasioned by the same critical mode, incompleteness of poetry, at the same time, calls upon us to confront the fundamental limitations of critical discourse to encompass a poetic hermeneutics (including this critical discourse). Poetry, we learnt, transcends functionality because it does not halt at the limits critical discourse needs to obtain its validation. Unlike critical discourse, poetry entails *divergence* in the hermeneutic circle. Objectivity – that separation of observer from the observed typical of, yet largely unacknowledged within, critical discourse – collapses poetic mystery to a set of mono-dimensional problems entailing distinct interpretative solutions in a vain attempt at an exhaustive critique.² But assigning more significations does not, in the end, *deepen* our appreciation of the poem. Sometimes, without attaching any particular meanings at all, the poem opens to us and we *understand* it profoundly, immediately and transparently. Nevertheless, elaborating a poem's meanings is by no means a worthless pursuit, as this chapter will attempt to show.

By taking the motif of the *ever-present problematic* to indicate the presence of a mystery properly so-called, we were able to disclose another mode of description, holding up to poetic incompleteness a mirror of being. That description brought us into the ontological realm – to which the ever-present problematic of the poem belongs. And in this sense, a poem was said to transcend its hermeneutical incompleteness. Poetic mystery yielded not only the purely negative of its ever-present problematic in incompleteness but also a *pointing towards* that which has no convenient base on which to strike. A mystery, therefore, obtained to a *sense of being* which engaged the reader's own *sense of being a being*, in the very *ground* of that questioning in which we are said to be, what Martin Heidegger called, "thinking".

² Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 19.

No matter how different though these modes of description are, they do not exist in isolation. More attached meaning expands the possibility for poetic mystery to be made manifest. That is, the problematic arising within every solution to the question of poetic meaning and providing the ground for hermeneutical incompleteness also bears the poem's mystery. Poetry's signification, ceasing to be solely a purveyor of meaning, becomes *meaningful*; meaningful by appealing to the reader's own sense of being, the mystery at the heart of *being a being* that constantly raises the question: "Who am I?" The self being of the reader is thus questioned and yet extended into the depths of poetic mystery.

Incompleteness and mystery intertwine, their meanings and meaningfulness profoundly interlinked. I have called this intertwining *enrichment* because meaning made meaningful turns out to be a profoundly enriching experience. Therefore, the gathering of critical meaning is neither arbitrary nor without purpose. Each new solution creates potential for mystery's meaningfulness to enrich. As a solution carries the restatement of the problem, such that we can neither escape its ever-present problematic nor its mysterious grounding, so each meaning bears the mystery at its heart, rendering it meaningful. Indeed, just as the definition of mystery depends upon transcending problem, so the definition of the meaningful depends upon transcending meaning. However, a poem might be meaningful without any attached meaning. I have found that on occasions a poem might appear hermeneutically opaque yet addresses the reader, myself, in a quite meaningful way. One can love something without knowing why. This experience is analogous to my experience of a painting, such as "Untitled Red" by Mark Rothko, which is profoundly meaningful to me, although I have no idea what "it means". But usually the attachment of more meanings, in a sense, allows further opportunity for mystery to manifest. When it does, it is profoundly enriching for the reader.

Enrichment manifests as the growing unity of poetic meaning with mystery such that meaning becomes more meaningful in consequence. Should that mystery be dismissed as *meaningless*, interpretation fails to yield convenient definition. In this case, the gathering solutions to the problem of a poem's sense encrust the poem, stifling the possibility of

enrichment. Either that or meaning fragments the poem and grants nothing but contradictory pieces without focus. Here the reader fails the poem but more importantly fails him or herself. My study ignores this failure, being without interest.

Entanglement and engagement

The poem acts as a central focus for the dialectical modes of description – incompleteness and mystery – thus far identified, allowing each to interpenetrate each other. “The *It* is the eternal chrysalis,” wrote Martin Buber of an analogous situation, “the *Thou* the eternal butterfly—except that situations do not always follow one another in clear succession, but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusedly entangled.”³

Although there might be a tendency to perceive the entanglement of incompleteness with mystery as chaotic, there lies within their essential difference possibility for an integrating expansion of meaning with the meaningful that is profoundly enriching. We have this common experience with poetry. This two-fold nature finds unity in the “Between,”⁴ the realm that arises in the intervening *space* between poem and reader, projecting out into the *space* between reader and world. The word “space” here implies *distantiation* as discussed in *Theory Chapter Two*, setting the poem apart from the reader, and *relation*, by which the reader engages with the poem set opposite.⁵ Disengagement (*distantiation*) and engagement (*relation*) belong to a single dialectical figure. Each presumes the other. Thus, Martin Buber’s conception of the *between* encompasses both a physical reality and a metaphorical reality (*it is* and *it is not*) like poetry itself.

The integrity of a poem permits the integration of sense meaning with that which is existentially meaningful, provided by the visceral presence of this speech; these rhymes, rhythms and alliteration, the shapes of these words, their melody and harmonies, and in articulated silences between word, line and stanza. I have called this inclusive integration “enrichment” to

³ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 17-18.

⁴ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 203-4.

⁵ Martin Buber (1965b) *The Knowledge of Man*: 118.

highlight the on-going possibility presented by a poem for the reader, in that it doesn't present as a once off event but an enduring happening. How, in short, the poem *enriches* the life of its reader through the ongoing relationship with the poem. Whereas, "incompleteness" and "mystery" as conceptions emphasize the poem, enrichment shines a light back towards the reader from the heart of the poem. I mean that quite literally. The *heart* of the poem represents its enriching possibility *for a reader*. Of course, a poem's mystery becomes meaningful precisely through the presumption of the mystery central to the reader's own sense of being. But that suggests only the way the reader serves the poem. Through *enrichment* we begin to excavate the manner in which a *poem serves its reader*.

It was said the mystery within the reader's sense of being unlocks the mystery of the poem. But the converse is also true. The mystery at the heart of poetry calls forth the mystery in the reader's sense of being. Henceforth, our reader's sense of being a being steps forth in exclusiveness – that is how Martin Buber describes the being of the *Thou*, implying that we become a *Thou* for ourselves.⁶ Within the bond between poem and reader there lies an essential mutuality. Each time we return to the poem, urged to do so in the light of its mystery, we ourselves are called forth in our wholeness and exclusivity. Withhold something of ourselves from this relation and the bond dissolves. Yet equally, if in obscurity the poem withholds itself from us, then it too breaks the bond. In that case, the poem failed the reader. But it also happens that at one reading a poem appears obscure, at another, the poem opens to the reader and all becomes luminous.

Obscurity of this kind does not reflect a poem's lack of "clarity" in the sense in which clarity is properly a property of critical discourse. In critical discourse, obscurity represents a barrier blocking *sound* to *sense* (in Frege's terminology) or from *signifier* to *signified* (in Saussure's semiotics). In poetry, obscurity can also be said to restrict the *openness* of the poem's words to uphold indefinite meaning (its "polysemy", if you will) along with its readiness to point

⁶ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 3-4.

towards the meaningful and sustain a growing sense of being. In obscurity, how can a reader's sense of being a being be called forth to answer and be enriched? Yet it can happen in mysterious ways. Both novel metaphor and difficult language tend to distantiate the poem from the reader. However, it happens to be these same metaphors and "difficulties" that open the way to mystery and sense of being. That which obscures also opens: distantiation and relation find their locus in exactly the same figure. The meaningful meaning enriches our sense of being.

The poem *lays claim* to its reader in a *vocational* sense rather than absolutely; there is no hint of control or authority here. Rhetoric, on the other hand, casts its voice, often in a deliberately emotional shape, to compel and claim its listeners in a controlling sense. The orator's *compelling* argument reproduces the compulsions typical of ideology "naturalized" by hegemonic power *replacing* a person's sense of being. Certainly, the latter reflects what theologians rightly call *demonic possession* in which the ontological centres of the person are voided and transferred to an external power.⁷ Poetry does not *lay claim* to its reader like this but *calls him/her forth to be present*. That sense of being we detect in the poem *enriches* our sense of being, it does not *replace* it. Here we begin to grasp the meaning of the "meaningful". Something is *meaningful* to us if it *calls us forth* to be present in ourselves to ourselves before another being, *engaging* without domination. I use the notion of "engagement" both in the spirit of the partnership that a couple wish to acknowledge each other on the road to marriage, and that captivation of the guiding interest when something fascinates. I am neither speaking of *marriage*, which brings with it certain presumptions of gender and formal contract, nor the sort of overwhelming fascination – *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – that grasps one so completely fanaticism inevitably follows. "Engagement" implies a meeting of equals that might be morally binding but not legally, and therefore, not dominantly. *Engagement* also dialectically encompasses *disengagement*. Poetry does not bind as if we "were grappled together, once for all, by hoops of steel."⁸ We might speak of the "power of the poem" yet do not regard this as a

⁷Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 126.

⁸ John Livingston Lowes (1930c) *The Road to Xanadu*: 238.

dominating power. Instead, we assert the charismatic appeal of the poem to *return us to ourselves* by responding to its words, its metaphors and to grasp existence. The reader does the grasping. The reader engages or to disengages.

The intimate relation between the meaning and the meaningful is entirely *personal*. What is meaningful is *meaningful to me* and must always be personal, because it is only in the sense of coming into being a being – of being a *person* – that the poem becomes meaningful to me and deeply and presently personal. Both the enumeration of meaning and the sensitivity to its mystery render the poem meaningful. The poem enriches us through all the intertwining planes of our deliberation. Enrichment entails the making of meaning meaningful while, at the same time, granting to mystery new, ever-expanding dimensions in the meanings assigned to the poem. The intertwining of meaning with the meaningful adds both breadth and depth to the encounter. In those metaphors of space – “breadth” and “depth” – the poem can be located and judged situational. In the situation of the poem we might take our place like that mighty oath of Martin Luther: “Here I stand!” We will take a step towards the nature of this standing in the next theory chapter: *On Affirmation*.

Poetry grants us our autonomy, autonomy that is certainly needed in order to achieve the liberation necessary to release the mystery in the poem as the mystery in one’s self. However, this claim is neither universally accepted nor acceptable to many literary critics or philosophers. I turn to the notion of the *kerygmatic* that Northrop Frye identified in the literature of *The Bible* as a potent reminder of an argument that *laying claim* directly contradicts notions of autonomy. My sole disagreement with Frye concerns the degree of claim and not with respect to the *kerygma* that relates to the whole of poetry. Whereas I argue the poetry of *The Bible* is like all poetry, vitally metaphorical and, therefore, unlikely to be the bearer of a specific rhetorical claim on its readers, sadly Frye appears less circumspect. I am surprised he did not bring his understanding of the mystery in literature to his reading of *The Bible*, for thus he might have grasped the existential dimension beyond assertions of its *authority*.

The nature of claiming

The point at which a text lays claim to its reader is of particular relevance to Biblical exegesis and for those who argue *The Bible* should represent the absolute authority of “scripture”. Even Northrop Frye, whose major studies of *The Bible and literature* are unencumbered by the traditional exegesis from belief, still grants to *The Bible* the power to lay claim to its readers. On this point, I will part company with him. I will deal with the development of his conception of the kerygmatic evident in his two major works on *The Bible* in chronological order.

Frye’s first work dedicated to *The Bible*, *The Great Code*, asserts its language cannot be assigned to the three classical modes of rhetoric – according to Aristotle: the “deliberative” (*exhortation* or *deterrence*), the “forensic” (*prosecution* or *defence*) and “display” (*praise* or *condemnation*).⁹ *The Bible*, Frye argues, isn’t metaphorical though it has metaphor in it. It has poetry without being poetic. Nor is it abstract and analogical though it possesses abstraction and analogy. He says its use of critical discourse is peremptory at best. Therefore, he differentiates Biblical language from poetry, critical discourse and formal rhetoric. Rather, it belongs to another category of rhetoric altogether, unknown to Aristotle, which Frye dubs “kerygma”, taken from the term denoting the central, underlying *message* or *proclamation* in the *New Testament* as opposed to its *teaching*. (*OED*) Although kerygma is generally restricted to the *message* of the four *New Testament* Gospels – *Mathew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John* – Frye argues that because there is little difference between the *Old* and *New Testaments*, “kerygma” identifies the rhetorical mode of the whole *Bible*. Nor can we identify *The Bible* with the *divine word* – the “word of God” – as is so often claimed for it. This merely converts *The Bible* into descriptive speech, something that causes particular heartache for theologians. The kerygma of *The Bible* calls for a response from all the personality. On the face of it, this aligns Frye’s kerygma with the response to poetic mystery described above. Furthermore, Frye notes, kerygma acts as a vehicle for “revelation,” as

⁹Aristotle (1991) *The Art of Rhetoric*: 80.

it is traditionally called, just as “myth” is identified as the linguistic vehicle for kerygma. That contradicts Rudolf Bultmann, whose groundbreaking paper, “On demythologising the Bible”, opposed *kerygma* to *myth* and called for the “demythologising” of the Gospels in order to disclose their true underlying kerygma.¹⁰ Frye maintained Bultmann’s project of demythologisation would result with the utter *destruction* of kerygma, not its disclosure.¹¹ Certainly, that which Bultmann considered the kerygma of the New Testament – *Christ’s call to the spiritual life* – is itself heavily mythological and would, therefore, be subject to removal by the process of demythologising. Kerygma cannot be refined from its primary vehicle of myth.

In Frye’s second book on *The Bible* and literature, *Words with Power*, we encounter a further exploration of kerygma and the kerygmatic. It is important, Frye says, to keep the term “kerygma” aside to describe only the *mode of language* that accounts for those mythic and literary qualities which *cannot* be detached from the Biblical narrative. Kerygma, in this revised form, exists as a mode of discourse “on the *other side* of the poetic.”¹² The kerygmatic does not derive from direct personal address in what a particular writer or poet has to say. Again, Frye casts the kerygmatic into an ethical mould when contrasting it with “ordinary rhetoric” which also proclaims yet paints its arguments using figurative tropes to colour exhortations for immediate action. Ordinary rhetoric seldom touches upon the primary ethical question of *how to live a more abundant life*, although *eudaimonia* formed the focus for all ancient ethics (and for the ethics outlined in my *Conclusion*). A more abundant life, Frye tells us, on the other hand, is the central theme for all “genuine kerygmatic”:

In poetry anything can be juxtaposed, or implicitly identified with, anything else.

Kerygma takes this a step further and says: “You are what you identify with.”¹³

Frye is eager to distance kerygma from rhetoric’s compulsion, as he has already done so in *The Great Code*. He also distances it from the poetic. Within the *poetic*, he says, no such

¹⁰ Rudolf Bultmann (1953) “On demythologising the Bible” in Bartsch, Hans Werner ed. (1953) *Kerygma and Myth*: 1-44.

¹¹ Northrop Frye (1982) *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*: 29-30.

¹² Northrop Frye (1990) *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*: 101.

¹³ Northrop Frye (1990) *Words with Power*: 116.

compulsion exists. Because anything is possible in the imaginative world within the context of the work – we often hear this called “the suspension of disbelief” – it grants freedom to the poetic imagination – although Frye mistakes *disengagement* for *negation*, which is not essentially true. Consequently, the poetic imagination and its intrinsic freedom must underlie what goes beyond it, namely the kerygmatic. We need to consider this argument carefully. Frye asserted:

The imaginative in itself cannot provide a “myth to live by,” but its freedom is the essential basis of all models that retain any sense of tolerance, and any understanding that there could be different models for other people. There is no individual basis for kerygma, in the sense that anyone could make up an anthology of kerygmatic writing or invent a kerygmatic work of his own. The kerygmatic grows out of a social recognition, and the Bible is kerygmatic at least partly because it has been recognized as such for so long.¹⁴

Given that Irenaeus, in his formidable *Against the Heresies*, dictated the shape of the *New Testament* – certainly that there were *four* Gospels and *four* alone – the constituents of *The Bible* itself weakens Frye’s contention there can be “no individual basis for kerygma.” Marcion, the leader of a second century Gnostic group, produced the oldest known list of books for a *New Testament*, laying down a personal collection of kerygmatic works essential to his version of Christianity.¹⁵ The *Nag Hammadi Library* revealed how extensive was the body of early Christian writings, many of them specifically identified and condemned by Irenaeus.¹⁶ Yet both Irenaeus and Marcion spoke in the name of their respective communities, rather like *Old Testament* prophets, and so the communal basis for kerygma might not be disproved. What marks the kerygmatic is the conjunction of the personal with the communal in ways that require further exploration. This I will leave to my chapter dedicated to the question of poetry and community.

¹⁴ Northrop Frye (1990) *Words with Power*: 117.

¹⁵ John Romer (1989) *Testament: The Bible and History*: 196-7.

¹⁶ Elaine Pagels (1982) *The Gnostic Gospels*: 17.

However, Frye's naïve historicism, justifying the authority of the kerygmatic text, is problematic, especially when the nature of the social group that supports and is supported by historical kerygma remains undifferentiated from that which enforces and is enforced by ideology or "ordinary rhetoric." Shifting the decisive ethical issue from the personal to a simple historicism does not grant any greater authority unless there is something intrinsic to the social group in history that confirms the person and the personal realm of the present. Popularity or power, even over a great period of time, is no measure of ethical validity. And while Northrop Frye's comments are specifically concerned with *The Bible* and other scriptural texts, its denial of compulsion contradicts his claim for historico-socially enforced expectations that render a text *kerygmatic*. On the contrary, in the earlier chapters of *Words with Power, myth*, which in his view is the vehicle for kerygma, derives from the poetic imagination. When converted to "scripture", those vital living metaphors convert to dead metaphors of doctrine. Suddenly, what was once a granting of personal exclusivity has become petrified into dogma, and *that* by necessity *compels*. Either we approach *The Bible* and other sacred writings with a view to their enriching poetry or we are crushed beneath the yoke of false certainty. To take the poetic text as "doctrine" is an utter disservice to its original poets, still present but veiled by the concrete charisma of the text, and their very real creative vocation.

In questioning Northrop Frye's premise distinguishing kerygma from poem, I do not devalue kerygma but revalue poetry. If people complain that this, therefore, leaves nothing special about *The Bible* other than being old, one counters by asserting that Frye's historicism too reduces *The Bible's* authority to mere longevity of acceptance. This leaves nothing to differentiate *The Bible* from any other piece of literature except its antiquity, and that must also apply to coeval works such as Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and even more, to the very much older *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Ultimately, I stand before the poetry of *The Bible*, not in religious zeal or in antagonism but with a view to entering into dialogue with it and its authors. That honours them far more than burdening their words with rigid interpretation. Enrichment does not entail the *identity* of reader with poem. Rather, it entails *dialogue* from the extension of

meaning and the meaningful in the enlargement of one's own sense of being in *relation* to the poetry. The *claim* kerygma supposes to place upon the person of the reader is not one of compulsion. Instead, the poem *addresses* the reader by that which is meaningful in mystery towards which all poetic meanings point.

Enrichment emerges in the interaction between hermeneutic incompleteness, generating ever new meanings, and its attendant ontological mystery, which promotes relation with the sense of being. We learn that every new meaning of a poem involves a further dimension in which being might exist and, therefore, provides another medium through which we encounter the other. The other need not be *mediated* by interpretation but the poem remains the Word of mediation, nevertheless. Mediation in critical discourse entails a barrier, a halt to engagement. This, on the contrary is an opening, a bringing forth into our presence. Mediation in the meaningful meaning represents a *carrying across*, a *bringing over* to meet us. The poem enriches precisely because it is the Word of mediation.

Contemplation and ingatheredness

We understood the extension of meaning in metaphor also bears the mystery of the poetic metaphor re-instated within every interpretation. Those meanings are redolent with that meaningful sense of being which call the person forward into existence. There is not so much the gathering of meanings as their *ingathering* to yield the meaningful. That is not a description of the identification implied by Frye's kerygma – the text *laying claim* to its reader – but rather the re-collection or in-gathering of meaning to yield its mystery and become meaningful. Thereby, the sense of being a being that I bring to my understanding of what it is to be is granted to the mystery of the poetic metaphor, making it live in a way quite alien, almost abhorrent to a pure critical discourse expunged of all its so-called “subjectivities.” *Ingatheredness* is no simple identification of self with text and meaning. Rather, ingatheredness bears upon the *opening* of the text in a way that is *meaningful to me* according to my own possibilities. In the poem the ingatheredness operates to open the text beyond the mere assigning of meanings to a greater awareness of what it is to be. That must surely be the direction in which enrichment will point,

itself the handmaiden of the mystery born aloft by meaning. Enrichment occurs from ingatheredness.

First, however, it is necessary to explore what *ingatheredness* means and its specific relation to the enrichment. Ingatheredness serves Gabriel Marcel's philosophy of existence as a description of *contemplation* in which the self becomes real to itself. Once again, we note a clear parallel with Martin Heidegger's conception of "thinking". Marcel wrote in *The Mystery of Being*:

In so far as we are accustomed to use the word contemplation to indicate an act by which the self concentrates its attention on its own state, or even on its own being, might we not very properly say that contemplation is a turning inwards of our awareness of the outer world?¹⁷

That he is not merely talking about egoism is fundamental. In egoism, an *object* self takes centre stage. Rather, without that sense of being a self provided by the ingathering of the self in relation to the poetic mystery, there could be no comprehension of what this mystery means outside a bare but infuriating incompleteness. It is here that Marcel broaches the idea of *ingatheredness*:

This idea becomes clearer, it seems to me, if one remembers that there can be no contemplation without a kind of inward regrouping of one's resources, or a kind of ingatheredness; to contemplate is to ingather oneself in the presence of whatever is being contemplated, and this in such a fashion that the reality, confronting which one ingathers oneself, itself becomes a factor in the ingathering.¹⁸

If a poem's meanings were only *collected* rather than *ingathered*, how would enrichment occur? Indeed, enrichment is by its very nature intimately connected to ingathering. Perhaps it might be said that the *ingathering* of the poem, along with its enumerated but incomplete meanings, is *identical* to enrichment. Except insofar as enrichment will not be the acting out of contemplation as a positive enlargement of being with being, so enrichment is not co-extensive

¹⁷Gabriel Marcel (1960a) *Mystery of Being Vol. 1*: 155-6.

¹⁸Gabriel Marcel (1960a) *Mystery of Being Vol. 1*: 156.

with ingathering. Instead, interpenetration of meaning by the meaningful – a *product* rather of ingatheredness – provides possibility for the being of the one who contemplates the poem. And importantly, does this not imply the split between “inwards” and “outwards” – inner and outer being – has been transcended in some way? We need to distinguish between *ingatheredness* and *abstraction*. This is what Marcel has to say:

Ingatheredness is not a state of abstraction from anything, and in fact the attitudes behind ingathering oneself, and abstracting oneself, are diverse and perhaps at opposite poles from each other. One abstracts one’s attention from something, which is as much as to say, leaves it aside, perhaps even leaves it in the lurch; ingatheredness on the other hand is essentially a state in which one is drawing nearer something, without abandoning anything.¹⁹

We recognize the “drawing nearer something” as identical with the *pointing towards* that accompanies the presence of a mystery: A sense of being towards which we feel drawn. And should the meanings we enumerate be allowed to point to mystery in that wonderful entanglement of meaning and the meaningful, then each enumerated meaning is itself a pointing towards that which we acknowledge both inside and outside the sense of being a being.

Enrichment, therefore, follows from ingathering, which is itself a drawing towards the mystery implicate in the texture of every meaning enumerated to “explain” the poem. And perhaps it is even more so when many more meanings have been enumerated. So that with ingathering, the enrichment brought to us through our relation with a poem is also an enrichment of ourselves. Indeed, enrichment must be an enrichment of the person or the division of “inwards” from “outwards” would not be transcended.

A text which *claims* the reader completely enforces nothing but *necessity* without creating any *possibility* whatsoever. I used the words of *possibility* and *necessity* advisedly. But poetry *qua* poetry allows the reader *to be*. Indeed, it *needs* the reader *to be* in order to promote dialogue. Poetry provides an essential balance between possibility and necessity that needs to be

¹⁹Gabriel Marcel (1960a) *Mystery of Being Vol. 1*: 159.

spelt out. It is therefore important we turn to the philosopher who first enunciated them, Søren Kierkegaard.

Possibility and necessity

Unlike critical discourse, poetry intrinsically *enriches* our relation with the world rather than replacing that relation with another. It seems we must read *poetically*. However, that does not mean critical discourse can never enrich our lives. My teacher, Dr. Julia Watkin, found in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard a philosophy by which she could live. I have had the same experience with the writings of Martin Buber amongst others. It would be cavalier in the extreme to deny to critical discourse values of life enrichment. However, poetry remains intrinsically enriching, whereas critical discourse has to work at it. Poetry does not impose meaning upon the world but instead opens and enriches our relation with the world – as we should expect if we were to take the divergence of the hermeneutic circle seriously. Unlocking *necessity*, poetry gives *possibility* wings.

I appeal here to the important dialectical categories of Søren Kierkegaard, expounded in his classic *The Sickness Unto Death*. It is essential to digress for a moment to explain these categories before applying them to the question of poetic enrichment. Kierkegaard introduces them thus:

Possibility and necessity are equally essential to becoming, (and the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom). Possibility and necessity belong to the self just as do infinitude and finitude (απειρον/περα [the unlimited/limited]). A self that has no possibility is in despair, and likewise a self that has no necessity.²⁰

Possibility's despair, says Kierkegaard, is *to lack necessity*. Now necessity is the limiting of possibility. The existentialists, taking their cue from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, came to speak of "facticity" but they meant the same thing. Insofar as the self is itself, it is the *necessary*, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is the *possibility*. But should possibility out-distance necessity, the self flees itself into pure, ungrounded possibility, whereby it has no

²⁰Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 35.

necessity to ground it. Within possibility's despair, then, the self flounders in only abstractions until it exhausts itself. Its flights of fancy have no ground in reality. The self cannot arrive anywhere because it never left:

To become oneself [wrote Kierkegaard] is literally a movement in that place. To become is a movement away from that place, but to become oneself is a movement in that place.²¹

For those given over to possibility without necessity, more and more things seem possible without anything becoming real. Inevitably *everything* appears possible. Every possibility takes time to become real. But the time given to each possibility shortens and, while this time should be spent on making the possible actual, everything fragments – nothing actual, everything trivial. Possibility might be made more and more intense, but its intensity does not privilege it in the actual. As soon as something possible appears, a new possibility arises, and another, and another... Kierkegaard's words thunder with such extraordinary gravity:

[A]nd this is exactly the final moment, the point at which the individual himself becomes a mirage.²²

Octavio Paz wrote something similar in his poem “The Other”:

He invented a face for himself
Behind it,
 He lived, died, and resurrected,
 Many times.
His face today
 Has the wrinkles of that face.
 His wrinkles have no face.²³

According to Kierkegaard, losing oneself in possibility takes two basic forms. The first is the form of *desiring* and *craving*, in which one pursues the *possibilities of desire*. The second is the form of the *melancholy-imaginary*, whereby one pursues the *possibilities of anxiety*. Losing

²¹Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 36.

²²Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 36.

²³ Octavio Paz (1979) *Selected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*: 77.

oneself in possibility, one rushes so far towards the objects of desire or fear, no return to the self is feasible.

On the other hand, necessity can overwhelm possibility. That is, despair also arises from lack of possibility.²⁴ Lacking possibility entails either everything appears necessary or that everything appears trivial.²⁵ Like the lack of necessity, lack of possibility manifests in different ways. Both the *determinist* and the *fatalist* live in despair, argues Kierkegaard, because everything has turned into necessity. The determinist's self has been suffocated by exclusive necessity, while for the fatalist, there is no God or, which amounts to the same thing, *his God is Necessity*. I will quote Kierkegaard because his words bear upon our attitudes to poetry:

That God's will is the possible makes me able to pray; if there is nothing but necessity, man is essentially as inarticulate as the animals.²⁶

Francis Webb provides an example of what Kierkegaard means. Webb describes the *Serf*, one of the characters from the poem cycle "The Canticale", in precisely this way. Having no possibility and living under an iron-fist necessity, he is also as "inarticulate as the animals." Poetry takes language into possibility through its becoming but is grounded in necessity. Contrary to his attitude to the Aesthete and the impression of poetry as existing solely in the temporal present, a jaundiced attitude to poetry, Kierkegaard's *prayer* should be taken as a true counterpart of poetry.

Prayer for Kierkegaard is a deeply personal and highly creative act. Without possibility, creativity is silenced. Prayer is silenced. Poetry is silenced. If we have learnt anything about poetry, it is this: the hermeneutic incompleteness of poetry brings with it possibility for new meaning that is real and personal. And as well: the mystery of poetry brings with it the possibility of new relation with being, also real and personal. Necessity is granted new possibility by poetry.

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 36.

²⁵ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 40.

²⁶ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 40-1.

Although Kierkegaard criticized those living without necessity in *desiring/craving* and in *melancholy-imaginary*, or living without possibility as the *determinist* and the *fatalist*, he saves his most trenchant criticism for those possessing the *philistine-bourgeois mentality*, as described in the *Introduction*. Converting everything into triviality, the philistine lacks *both* necessity and possibility with no ground for being necessary and no potentiality for becoming:

The philistine-bourgeois mentality is spiritlessness; determinism and fatalism are despair of the spirit, but spiritlessness is also despair. The philistine-bourgeois mentality lacks every qualification of spirit and is completely wrapped up in probability, within which possibility finds its small corner; therefore it lacks the possibility of becoming aware of God. Bereft of imagination, as the philistine-bourgeois always is, whether alehouse keeper or prime minister, he lives within a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens. In this way, the philistine-bourgeois has lost his self and God.²⁷

For us to become aware of ourselves, imagination must lift them higher than the “miasma of probability”. But, Kierkegaard says, the philistine has no imagination, never seeks it and even despises it. The fatalist and determinist carry enough imagination to despair of possibility – sufficient to discover *impossibility* – but the philistine reassures himself with the trite, the trivial and the obvious and despairs when things go badly. Whereas fatalism and determinism *lack relaxation and mitigation* to temper overriding necessity, the philistine believes he *controls* all possibility by converting it into the *probable* and exhibiting his “prowess” over the probable as its supposed *master*. Yet because he thinks himself master, the philistine imprisons himself in spiritlessness and is the “most wretched of all.”²⁸ *Meus miserrimus*. Certainly, one cannot help but here be reminded of T. S. Eliot’s disturbing portrait of *The Hollow Men*:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
[...]

²⁷ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 41.

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 42.

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion.²⁹

The Hollow Men are related to Dante's lost souls that linger in limbo beside the River Acheron.

Without even evil they cannot enter "death's other Kingdom":

These souls, immortal, have no hope of death,
and their blind lives crept grovelling so low
they leer with envy at every other lot.

The world allows no rumour of them now.

Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.³⁰

Poetry walks the sharp edge between necessity and possibility, bringing both into play or failing as poetry. With poetry we discover the possibility of new meaning and we give it necessity when that meaning is recognized as being meaningful. Conversely, poetry grants to our *sense of being a being*, that necessity at the heart of being a self, new possibilities of becoming. In both these cases, we recognize the existential value of poetry is profoundly enriching in ways that only the best critical discourse might achieve, and often then only by incorporating poetic-like expression. Without the depth of mystery, poetry turns trivial, the condition of *verse* as epitomized by the limerick. Without the possibility of generating new meaning in the contingency of incompleteness, poetry would become all necessity, which is the true condition of critical discourse that aims to reduce possibility of meaning to a univocal sense. This means *this* but *not that*. It has been argued that poetry has no necessity in it, but that is false. Its necessity, however, will not be deterministic but something far more mysterious: the *pointing towards* being by which we grasp ourselves in relation with the other.

The usefulness of Kierkegaard's categories in underscoring poetic discourse can be gauged by the divergence of the hermeneutic circle opening up possibility of meaning, on the one hand, and by the necessity we recognize in meaning when it becomes *meaningful* to us, on the other. Poetry takes language from the confines of the dictionary and enriches it with new

²⁹ T. S. Eliot (1963) *Collected Poems 1909-1962*: 89.

³⁰ Dante Alighieri *The Inferno*. Tr. Anthony Esolen. Canto 3, lines 47-51: 24-5.

existential possibility. The poet's creativity opens language to new possibility. And we come to it without compulsion to take that language thus making real that new possibility. Poetic freedom is fundamentally *ontological*: the freedom to be/come oneself. And thus we begin to grasp what all these necessities and possibilities indicate: the being and becoming of the reader. Therein lies the true value of enrichment.

Enrichment and grace

I reach thus far in order to identify the potential poetry has for *bringing the self to the self* in terms of its *necessity* and its *possibility*. Both are present. And *world* or *being* is granted over against the reader. While poetry enriches with new possibility, it is not divorced from necessity. If it were, poetry would simply float away on a cloud of empty possibility, every interpretation appearing equally valid without connection to reality. Then meaning shatters, being dissolves and the self will be the most wretched of all: *Meus miserrimus*. It is true that a poem forms itself within a primal disengagement but *disengagement* does not necessitate *denial* or negation. On the contrary, poetry disengages in order to grant possibility to necessity.

A poem provides *situation* to interpretation, a focus around which different interpretations can orbit like a wheel on its axle. No poetic interpretative act will be arbitrary. Its freedom is of a different order: the freedom to be ourselves in relation: The freedom to make this affirmation if we are able and willing: And the freedom to enter into dialogue with the poem and the poet. The poem's necessity and possibility comes to be experienced as *grace*. That is, to engage with a poem, not only does each of us require the will to engage, but the poem needs to step up to us as much as we step towards it.

Grace in this context might be identified with a poem's "style." I mean that quite literally. The style is the face a poem turns towards its reader. It grants the measure of the poem's grace in its readiness to be open, openable and opening. This is not the usual characterization of "style". I am describing the existential dimension of style in a poem that makes it *graceful*. The voice of the poet has a style that reaches out to the eye and ear of the reader. What if like Empson I should have used the word "beauty" to characterize that face which the poem turns towards its

reader? It certainly presumes affective attraction of the person towards the poem. What is more attractive than beauty? But “beauty” bestows a much distorted picture of that which attracts us. What if the poem should be decidedly ugly or brutal? We could perhaps refer to this as a “dark beauty” but that merely draws us down into the mire of qualification and counter-qualification without preserving in essence that which the poem achieves in facing us. “Grace,” on the other hand, is a *granting*, a *gifting* but also a *comportment* towards the reader and to the world of being affirmed by the poem, using the word in the same sense as in “God’s *grace*”. Style is intimately a condition of grace but need not necessarily obtain beauty. That does not mean, of course, that a poem eschews beauty or that a reader will never judge the work “beautiful”. Although a fine literary-critic like William Empson placed a high value on beauty, sitting well within the Platonic ideal,³¹ this traditional category of aesthetics has become the bearer of dubious meaning. For example, the expression “beauty industry”, a common descriptor for the collective manufacture and marketing of cosmetics, reveals the potential for misunderstanding. Of course, all words are open to such abuse but a “*grace* industry” is barely feasible. I shall have more to say about grace below in the theory chapter devoted to relation.

Enrichment from the grace of poetry is a defining feature of Francis Webb’s poem cycle “The Canticle.” Not only does the relation with the work enrich existence but it lies central to the poet’s exploration of that which is meaningful within his own religious outlook. Webb treats the primacy of poetry in religion with subtlety. This makes possible an understanding of the place of poetry in motivating change from an inauthentic to an authentic life. Before their encounter with St Francis, all characters exhibit classical Kierkegaardian characteristics of living in despair (including the *Wolf of Gubbio*). The sublime encounter enabled each to “choose himself,” that decisive “ethical stage” described by Kierkegaard. The fundamental idea behind the ethical stage so appealed to the existentialists, they made Kierkegaard the “founding father” of their movement. While Kierkegaard was certainly important for existentialism, his philosophy can

³¹Plato (1952) *The Phaedrus*.

only be regarded as “existentialist” in those works which address human existence per se. The edifying discourses are perhaps closer to Kierkegaard’s sense of his philosophy and speak less of existentialism and more of *what it is to be Christian in Christendom* where Christianity has become institutionalised and normative. There are parallels between Kierkegaard and “The Canticle” that enable us to consider the Webb’s poetry in light of the Danish philosopher. Webb appears to be employing his poetry in a manner characteristic of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous writings. The poetry presents portraits within which we might see ourselves so that we too might “choose ourselves”. Each character’s redemption lifts a mirror to our own lives. We find the poem illuminating our own sense of being in a profoundly enriching way.

Case Study Chapter III

The Canticle

Webb's first openly religious major work and most ambitious piece so far, "The Canticle" greatly advances the model of the eclipsed presence typifying his major works to this date. In place of the former negative absence, however, the lacuna at the heart of "The Canticle" openly affirms a positive spiritual presence, a major development in Webb's poetry, reflecting a similar movement made by T. S. Eliot from *The Hollow Men* to *The Four Quartets* and *Murder in the Cathedral*. A spiritual vacuum occurs in the mystic's *emptiness*, a lucid, self-contained space within the person, which represents an opening for God to make himself present in the world. Thus, the saint becomes an absent but powerful source of grace for each of the poem's characters.

Webb's St. Francis brings the poetic life to his fellow creatures, human and animal, whose poetic voices build the ring about the spiritual focus of the saint. Following G. K. Chesterton's assessment of St. Francis as a "poet whose whole life was a poem"¹ whereby the saint could be critically recovered from *The Canticle of the Sun*, St Francis's great hymn to the glory of creation, Webb found in his Medieval namesake a confrere and spiritual exemplar. Webb will make Francis's *Canticle of the Sun* the cornerstone of his own "Canticle," quoting its passages, notably in Part Three, but also very subtly introducing its joyful tones and textures as if the Medieval song were being born aloft on the breath. Certainly, such subtle allusion is a hallmark of Webb's poetry from his earliest published poems onwards. Michael Griffith describes the influences that motivated Webb to write "The Canticle":

There was his deepening religious awareness in Canada and his consequent resolve that now his poetry 'must openly acknowledge God and the Redemption'. There was also the personal crisis which precipitated his particular interest in the St Francis legend. Webb's comment on the poem 'A Leper', as a 'type of my guilt' is the strongest indication that he saw his involvement with the St Francis

¹ G. K. Chesterton (1924) *St Francis of Assisi*: 102.

story as a personal quest for grace, and ‘A Leper’ is one of the most graphic self-portraits that we have from this period.²

Griffith notes how Webb’s reading and meditation at the Franciscan monastery at Wahroonga had far-reaching consequences for the work. “The Canticle” exhibits a profound sophistication in Webb’s understanding of the significance of Francis both in his time and for our modern world. Griffith, however, at times falls for the siren-song of tracking allusions as if they were *sources* for the poem. While Griffith does not quite fall into the trap of fragmenting the text into a mere collection of sources, as did John Livingston Lowes in his massive study of Coleridge in *The Road to Xanadu*, he comes perilously close.

The Canticle above all, reveals the existential consequence of enrichment as St Francis encounters each person, changing them from a state of despair, identical to Kierkegaard’s aesthete, to a state of joy and redemption in a meaningful life, Kierkegaard’s “ethical” and “religious” stages. Enrichment, as identified in the last chapter, describes the existential movement from the surface appearances of mere signification, the narrow hermeneutic of objective meaning, to the depths of that meaning made meaningful by the proximity of the mystery towards which it points. *The Canticle* grants a beautifully crafted portrait of enrichment as it marks this transition for character and reader alike, underlining G. K. Chesterton’s view of St Francis as a “poet”. Throughout, the figure of St. Francis remains in the distance, himself the mystery of the spirit towards which all their lives will eventually point and from which their lives become deeply and intensely meaningful. Poetry can enrich our own lives in the same way. St. Francis, the poet-saint, stands for this existential enriching possibility of all poetry.

Aesthete and saint

The travellers prepare for Assisi. Webb’s first poem begins in the fashion of a travelogue. There is a calm matter-of-factness about this introduction. We begin, therefore, in the common experience of the technician or aesthete, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to hint at the mystery in the drama to come. Even so, Francis Webb makes clear his intention from the very

²Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 169.

first line: This will not be a history lesson like, for example, Edwin Arnold's epic treatment of the Buddha's life in *The Light of Asia*. Webb has no interest in creating an historical epic but a much more formidable and mysterious understanding of Francis and the spiritual redemption brought by the saint to the lives of ordinary people. Like *Ben Boyd*, the sequence pivots on the figure of Francis as a lacuna almost without appearing in person. Yet he is present nevertheless in the tangible changes to each figure. That might best be summed-up by Martin Buber's conception of the *Between*:³ Although the saint is rarely physically present in the poetry, his presence exists in each character's vocational transformation to an acceptance of the self and its situation. That is, his being inhabits the redemption of the different personages coming into contact with him, figures including a Leper, the Father (of Francis), the Wolf of Gubbio, a Jongleur (a minstrel), a Serf and a Knight. These characters are the incarnation of St Francis's true canticle.

The travellers prepare for their journey to Assisi in the cold morning. The prologue introduces the world and emergent message of St Francis blowing in on a breath of wind; spirit, breath, air and psyche are old friends:

The frost eyes open very cautiously,
Grey stone knuckles knock and fidget for a hand-hold
In the loose air.⁴

Does one catch the bare whisper of Coleridge's sublime conversation poem "Frost at Midnight"⁵ where the "frost performs its secret ministry /Unhelped by any wind." The travellers seem to be pilgrims, who have listened to tales of Assisi, its rulers and its saint, by the campfire. And like every pilgrim or tourist, solely concerned with their prospects for finding lodgings in the town. The saint does not as yet exert any influence on their lives. They are still bound to the imperfections of what Kierkegaard calls an *aesthetic life*, far from a state of grace with the universe:

³ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 203.

⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 127.

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1967) *The Complete Poems*: 231.

Hard to see, Assisi lies straight ahead of us.
So tiny? We have all heard of it – campfire stuff:
Tight front and spirit a-whirl against wicked Barbarossas,
High life and excellent hostelries, with Perugia
Romantically plotting in the background.⁶

Unnoticed by the travellers, Nature pays homage to the saint. Webb's natural theology is subtly invoked here. As the pilgrims come upon other travellers on their journey, ordinary people one meets by the road, they will exchange greetings without communicating anything of themselves or encountering the others as *potentially* a *Thou*. Martin Buber tells us how one is able to meet another in an instant as "real communication streams across" of the *I-Thou* relation, quantitatively different from *I-It*, even only if in passing and quickly moving on. But this is not the case here. Here there happens to be no true encounter with others in actuality:

Wayfaring or stockstill – just the usual crew,
Merchant to mendicant and public entertainer.
We shall overtake these one by one, weighing them all;
For they, in a manner of speaking, will bid for us,
To breathe our air for quite some little time.⁷

"Passing the time" – *pastime* – so indicative of a lack of real engagement with the world. The journey is either to be suffered or enjoyed, mostly the latter, but the thought that it might be a quest does not even occur to them. However, Webb remains true to his sympathies towards his pilgrims; there is nothing debauched or criminal in their intent, they are simple ordinary people, easy-going and without malice, who share a typical human affability in the company of their fellows. On the wind is born aloft a song of what possibility can be, even for the common crowd. Again we find Webb striking an anti-Nietzschean note, for Nietzsche tended to consider the sole creator the only authentic person, as we discussed in the chapter on *Leichhardt in Theatre*.⁸ The crowd can only be the "herd", an obstacle on the path to liberation, but Webb sees in the

⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 127.

⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 127.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche (1969) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 88-91.

common crowd something quite different: Although their spiritual possibilities remain latent, they are still present. Adopting the short lines of a song, Webb introduces the distant figure of a sublime simplicity. This is as close as we'll get to a portrait of the saint. A man, who is likely to be Francis, continues his peripatetic life with a song of joy:

But farther on,
Harder to place,
Is a man – too soon
To observe his face:
[...] he seemed
For a solitary
Moment of dim
Morning to carry
Assisi with him.⁹

The saint is such an ordinary person that he passes unremarked by the travellers, who are locked into their demanding itinerary; the tourist's timetable. They pay no heed to his song as it floats in the air; neither to the singer nor to his song. As a result they lose this opportunity to encounter the saint first hand, as he is eclipsed by his commonplace, quaint appearance:

Now a song is quick –
New sun, round symbol
Blown to us,
Wind-ferried, humble,
Mountainous.¹⁰

The allusions to Francis's *Canticle of the Sun* are, as usual, subtly rendered by Webb: The "new sun" of *Brother Sun*, whose "round symbol" is "blown to us, /Wind-ferried" by *Brother Wind*, a momentous but humble message from the saint. "Mountainous," that great manifestation of *Mother Earth*, might almost be a homonym for "momentous." All these images are not actually prosopopoeia – figures of speech in which an inanimate or abstract thing is personified or given human characteristics – in the strict sense. Rather, they represent an *address*

⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 127-8.

¹⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 128.

– “Brother,” “Sister,” “Mother” – to natural beings in a familial and familiar relation to the saint. Disclosed is the cosmic integration of Francis into creation as an apotheosis of natural theology. But this time, the travellers in their hustle and bustle lose all prospect of encountering the saint and his message, although it was the attraction of the saint that sent them on their pilgrimage. Their knowledge is not existential in that it has yet to enter their lives as a living consciousness. That is, their knowledge remains essentially trivial and at best technical. One might also characterize their method of *seeking knowledge* in the same way: Not yet a living quest (pilgrimage), nothing more than a mere mechanism for their entertainment as tourists.

With the next poem in the series, the poet introduces us to the first of the characters who will confront their existential desolation and, through their encounter with the saint, discover true possibility in the place where they are, “the I chooses itself – or more correctly, it accepts itself,” wrote Søren Kierkegaard.¹¹ Becoming fully themselves, they will “choose their despair,”¹² and enter an *ethical* and *religious relation* that properly affirms them in creation. I will treat the characters individually as each first appears in Part One, in despair and desolation, following with how each appears in Part Three after the encounter with the saint. That the “seven deadly sins” neatly identify their states of despair in no way implies they have *chosen* to sin, for their “sin” is one of being.

Invidia: the envy of the Leper

The Leper held a particular fascination for Webb.¹³ Perhaps there is some self-identification here because the Leper suffers the same sting of social stigma, isolation and banishment as do mental patients like Webb in our time. And yet Webb is not uncritical of him either, while acknowledging the sheer abysmal terror of the Leper’s despair. As he speaks, the Leper discloses his belief that he himself is not quite human. Exiled both socially and in poverty,

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 491.

¹² Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 513.

¹³ Michael Griffith (1991) *God’s Fool*: 169.

the Leper has been given neither consolation nor compassion from church or society respectively. His anger shows in his envy of those who gain admission to the town.

The town has a high wall. Yes, it is a man speaking,
Only for himself – no other will hear him, believe in him.¹⁴

But he is yet only a “man” solely in name; barely that, a monstrosity, a travesty of a man, a canker. The wall will return as a motif for his exile not only from others but also from himself. Outside this wall, the world of nature is there only to be suffered, just as the townsfolk serve up another kind of wall to the beggars and the lepers, their charity is but a minor nuisance to be bestowed at leisure. They cannot see past his disease. That is certainly the Leper’s opinion of them, thus he damns himself at the same time:

There is always *this* question, *this* something, in its yellow
Rags which prefigure the almost living ulcer
Beneath them, whose words are the filthy vivid trickling
Never quite congealed by a halfpenny’s smug bandage.¹⁵

The seasons and elements of nature are synthesized with the townsfolk into a single image of suffering and denial: The townsfolk’s disdain for the Leper is itself understood as a kind of leprosy, a leprosy of the soul; the natural world’s indifference to his suffering reflects the townsfolk’s indifference, and the Leper, himself, reflects in his own identity that state of neglect that has been shown him:

Look aside, look aside. Yet this non-human thought
Cannot furl its bewildering pennon, must utter itself.
I am the graceless utterance, the question, the thought.¹⁶

Even that which is presented as “God’s mercy” comes grudgingly parcelled out in fits and starts by representatives of Holy Orders. Lepers and other outcasts have been granted a church of their own under the auspices of St Mary Magdalene, the Patron Saint of outcasts, “so there are stones, eyes /To contain my grossness without the blink of ruin?” But the Leper’s heart

¹⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 128.

¹⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 129.

¹⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 129.

is riven by anger and the hatred feeding on his desire for vengeance. He gains nothing from God's grace, thus judging himself less than a human-being. In short, he too suffers from a similar leprosy of the soul to that which afflicts the thoughtless townsfolk. The "love", represented in the Eucharist, is only the *appearance* of love, in a statue, in a priest's conventional salutations. All the forms of social decency are observed but not enacted. Despair empties them of all that is meaningful. Whether well-intended or not, the forms of observance are perceived to be hypocritical. The existential condition of the Leper is contained in the image of the wall that exiles him from hearth and home, kith and kin, from self-worth and conventional salvation. His is a fallen state, spiritually as well as physically. He has chosen the state of outcast victim, angry with the world for forcing him into this fall, what Heidegger called "thrownness."¹⁷ Because circumstances have dealt him this cruel hand, he too reflects the hollowness of Eliot's "Hollow Men," not even granted the honour of admission into Hell:

See, this high wall, tall oak, is mine by right –
Stone quartered to brace a crumbling skin, to appease
The festering ravenous gully – for an eye closed
And desire gaping, the wall!

It is almost a man speaking.¹⁸

He is not quite a "man". The Leper has become a wall for himself, closing himself from all humanity but his anger; his spite, his hate, his lust for a little human warmth, like the wall, guards his hollowness. And within his degenerate, walled-up leprosy, lay nothing but "the festering ravenous gully." The suppurating sores of his disease have also rotted his soul. There lies no ontological mystery within but domination by affliction. Never has there been a more visceral description of the human condition engendered by existential despair as this, equivalent in every respect to Kierkegaard's description of despair as the "Sickness unto Death," in which one desires death but cannot die.¹⁹

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger (1962) *Being and Time*: 174.

¹⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 129.

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 18.

How St. Francis answers the Leper's envy and despair will take us to the heart of what it means to be an authentic human. Webb introduces the third part of "The Canticle" with the voice of the saint quoted directly from *The Canticle of the Sun*, St. Francis's great hymn to the God of creation and the natural world. Passages from this hymn will be quoted regularly throughout Part Three. But from the position of the infirmity in the Leper's soul and the nature of his deliverance makes these lines doubly significant for him as they were, no doubt, for the poet who quoted them:

*Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for those who forgive for love
of Thee, and patiently bear infirmity and tribulation.*²⁰

Immediately, one is reminded of the beautiful moment in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* when the Mariner begins to break the spell when he "blessed them [the water snakes] unaware."²¹ From that moment the Mariner's redemption commences. To bless that which brings our greatest distress or seems on the surface to be entirely worthless; is the first act of redemption, for in that moment, the self is no longer excluded from the blessing: To bless brings blessing upon him who blesses.

Part Three opens with the Leper's cries of exultation like the peal of a great bell, calling us to witness the miracle:

Forgiven, forgiven.
Forgiven by the road.²²

These short lines now no longer sustain the interminable agony of despair, but contain a simple lyric of the same tripping lightness that characterized the saint's song. The wall dissolves. Suddenly we have been ushered into the open spirit of the road; the road, once the empty dislocation of exile outside the towns' walls, now transforms into the road to salvation. The Leper has been forgiven by the road; the road that has been the source of so much hatred and fear. Yet the first movement in the Leper's redemption is his openness to receive the forgiveness

²⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 138.

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1967) *The Complete Poems*: 176.

²² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 138.

of the road, the brute hard fact of “grey obdurate flint”, mile after mile after mile of grey obdurate flint. Yet what road ever turned away an unwilling wayfarer? The forgiving road supports those in exile whom townsfolk fear, hate, reject and banish.

These would not gainsay
A sudden wayfarer,
Lamp in the spectrum’s tent,
Homing shades to the one mirror
And white of embodiment.²³

The Leper’s deformities of body and soul have been cleansed by a spiritual act, not to remove those terrible afflictions but to find acceptance, to “choose your despair.”²⁴ All of this has resulted from an act of simple human kindness that enables the Leper to enter a state of grace and to receive the blessing through the loving ministration of Francis, “given” echoing the “forgiven” that opens the poem:

Given, the kiss of peace,
Given, a white way,
Love aloft in those hands.²⁵

How different from the bitter whine exhibited in the earlier poem: “Nor can I credit the Love aloft in those hands.” If we then return to the opening lines – “Forgiven, forgiven. /Forgiven by the road” – the Leper’s exultation might easily be a response to the words spoken by Jesus to the lame man who had been lowered on his bier down to the ministering Christ: “Son, thy sins be forgiven thee. Arise, and take up thy bed and walk.”²⁶ And what transformation comes from the simple, very human gesture, the embrace and kiss of brotherhood? The Leper joins a select fellowship having received absolution for his sins of envy, resentment and rejection of those who forced him, through fear, into exile. But above all, this is absolution for his self-

²³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 138.

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 513.

²⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 138.

²⁶ *Mark* 2, 5-10.

loathing written in the suppurating sores on his body. All the walls of the world are but nothing to a touch given in love:

Is there any wall withstands
This one white embrace?²⁷

The lyrical simplicity of this first poem in Part Three imparts a luminous candour to the Leper's redemption. And like the song lyric at its simplest, the central act of the Leper's encounter with St. Francis is barely announced, yet it is everything. Its reverberations are felt, bright and strange, echoing across the very landscape, strong and vibrant. We sense the Leper's joy in the stark simplicity of these stanzas, the song of a simple man, the song of the saint sung from his lips.

Avarita: the greed of the Father

The next person to speak could not be more different in circumstances from the Leper. Yet this man is also consumed by despair and hatred. He disowns his son, Francis, for deviating from the merchant's way of avarice and materialism. That Francis's father, Pietro Bernadone, follows the Leper in Webb's sequence suggests that we are to draw a comparison between the two. He begins with bravado, a man swaggering about town, known to all and sundry, assured of his own self-importance and social prestige; a man who treats people, such as his own son, as he does the merchandise he trades, without grasping any sense of a greater destiny in humanity:

I am the merchant Bernadone,
Also the weaver, artisan,
Full face, full pocket, everywhere known,
All this – and very much the man.

[...]

What love I owned – a man is speaking –
Hovered two-handed above this fleece;
Obedient threads deployed from creaking
Spindles to figure my increase.²⁸

²⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 138.

²⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 130.

That a man can “own” love is a profoundly disturbing thought. Yet there is a great overweening pride in so owning love – “a man is speaking” – and owning it, presumes to lavish his love upon his unruly son, grooming the youth to take up the reins of the family fortune, to become a mirror-image of himself as no doubt he was the mirror-image of his own father. This was the world which he understood and knew. This was the correct, conventional way, the way to wealth and prestige, the way of pride. He would reject his son utterly for stepping off the path chosen for him. The child must be moulded to the one strict social position.

His mother’s love must disobey,
Cooked up some wicked warm design
For my son to tread the unruly way,
A change, a growing. Foot down was mine.²⁹

Webb also imparts a ballad curve to this poem, first granted by indenting the lines as the poet had done for the song in the introductory poem, *Assisi*. Each stanza is of four lines, typical of the ballad form, with an accompanying melody conveyed by the simple *abab* rhyme and dominant if variable rhythmic structure, a strict and precise set of limitations bearing on its speaker’s self-imposed existential prison. Yet Webb’s subtlety wends its way through the naiveté of strict metre, gently subverting it as Francis’s song went forward subverting the dominant materialistic paradigm of his disciplinarian father’s rigid verse. The father is unconscious of his own despair and like all unconscious despair, he *projects* blame upon the person of his son. Kierkegaard wrote:

[If] a man is presumably happy, imagines himself to be happy, although considered in the light of truth he is unhappy, he is usually far from wanting to be wrenched out of his error. On the contrary, he becomes indignant, he regards anyone who does so as his worst enemy, he regards it as an assault bordering on murder in the sense that, as is said, it murders his happiness.³⁰

Everything tidy, parcelled up in neat boxes, enframed composites of his control, the shadow everywhere of technical mastery over all probabilities; Bernadone is every bit the

²⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 130.

³⁰ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 43.

“Bourgeois-philistine” so decried by Kierkegaard. Even the advent of war, the Father declares, should not affect the structures of existence that he has built around himself. Indeed, he fails to realize how also here in war some other spirit lived in his son.³¹

He describes how something came from within Francis, not from any external cause. This marks the life of the Father as living according to the strictures of appearance, dependent purely on externalities. Therefore he regards character, being, will be moulded according to social forces and not bear witness to the deep vocations of the self. That is an utterly “Hollow Men” morality. What was inside Francis, what we might understand as “ontological mystery,” underpinned the new dialogue with the world created by the saint.³² But both these concepts – being and dialogue – would be entirely beyond the comprehension of the Father. That the world-order should be transcended by a new path to salvation was seen solely as a “contravention,” a violation of conventional social order, rather than an affirmation of life. The walls that shut the Leper out, shut the Father in.

When Francis began giving away his father’s wealth, he offended every facet of his father’s narcissistic pride that was based ultimately upon possession of property and a considerable but empty materialism. The father’s judgment is swift and merciless towards his son. He regards him as worse than a criminal, worse than that, a traitor, a leper.

I say, as a man: what was of me
Is offal. Can a last obstinate
Thread get past the double eye
And tinsmith’s beauty of my hate?³³

How his hate is described in the metaphor of “tinsmith’s beauty” captures both the glittering cutting-edge of scorn and the decoration that is worn but does not penetrate the soul. He wears his hate just as he wore his “love” like a badge, an ornament that glitters in the sun, like his temper, but remains purely decorative. His repetition of his identity “as a man” indicates

³¹ Francis Webb. *Collected Poems*: 72.

³² G. K. Chesterton (1924) *St Francis of Assisi*: 98-102.

³³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 131.

that although he is brash and full of bluster, this man is, like the Leper, not quite a man. He is a little bit of a man masquerading as the whole man. That is, not a man who enters into that reflection, that ingatheredness which brings us fully into our recollection of being, but a figure bound, like the Leper, to his aesthetic (Kierkegaard) externalities; a mask. Even as he is unlike the Leper in his grandiloquence, that which makes him unlike the Leper places him in precisely the same existential *cul de sac*. Where the Leper's self-evaluation was based on the rotting flesh of his appearance, so the Father's self-evaluation is cast in the likeness of his ornamentation. But though he blames his son for his despair, his despair derives from the narrow aesthete's trap for which he is ultimately responsible. Kierkegaard describes the unhappy "happy" one:

[H]e is completely dominated by the sensate and the sensate-psychical, because he lives in sensate categories, the pleasant and the unpleasant, waves goodbye to spirit, truth, etc., because he is too sensate to have the courage to venture out and to endure being spirit. However vain and conceited men may be, they usually have a very meagre conception of themselves nevertheless, that is, they have no conception of being spirit, the absolute that a human can be; but vain and conceited they are—on the basis of comparison.³⁴

The ballad form operates on the level of simple mechanistic storytelling. It does not delve into the reflections of the lyrical, but remains posited on conventional discourse. The reasons for an action or the human drama within it, occupies a gap in the narrative, like, for example, the *storm* in the ballad *Sir Patrick Spense*, when Sir Patrick obeys the King's command to put to sea in a storm, knowing it will bring disaster upon him and the ship's crew. All we know of their fate is the image of the crew's hats bobbing in the water. Webb's choice of the ballad form to voice the situation of the father discloses the true nature of the man. We only learn that his pride was humiliated because his son began handing out the family wealth as alms for the poor and destitute. He won't attempt to understand the depths of this human drama nor the reasons behind it. His being is as tied to the ballad form as Sir Patrick Spense and he will remain encapsulated in this form as he is encapsulated in his social role while he persists in his obstinate vainglory.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 43.

From the *Canticle of the Sun* Webb incorporates this verse, telling in its lyrical but simple intensity of the earth sustaining us, not merely as the ground beneath our feet but sustaining us, feeding us, supporting us and bringing forth ever-present delight³⁵:

*Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for our mother the Earth, which
Sustains us, nourishes us and brings forth many-coloured
herbs and flowers and every kind of fruit.*³⁶

As with the Leper, Part Three reveals a very different man in the Father. The Father soberly reclaims himself by penitence. He knows that, against the dread of the Last Trump, his worldly possessions are as nothing. Wealth cannot hide nor answer the deep despair that has riven his heart. The words and deeds of his son Francis, that he so perilously thought to be rejection, rejection of him and all that he stood for, have now been seen for what they truly are: The rejection of material greed, the rejection of mere appearances alone as the sole arbiter of reality, sole descriptor of value, sole determinant of one's own social standing. The language is now freed of its ballad straightjacket, obtaining a lyricism that declares itself in adjectival metaphors dreadfully disturbing and exhilarating, the sort of abyssal undoing of the soul that can only come from a profound love.

Continents I claimed and charted against the Last Day
But to no avail: the needle-prows of a schism
Tormented my fabric, that dawn's riding light
Concluded a treaty with urgent darkness,
Marrying my hand to the metal without law –
Creator declared journeyman of undoing.³⁷

We recognize in Webb's use of adjective as metaphor the story of Francis and his turning from his Father's material hubris. Consider Francis's public disrobing in the forecourt of the cathedral, because he could no longer tolerate the fine clothes provided by a merchant's wealth and lust for power.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*: 42-3.

³⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 138.

³⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 139.

Yes, that naked guild
Clapped the trump to my lips, fixed it there.³⁸

A momentous act told in two short lines marks the Father's own turning to acceptance of, and choosing, his despair. His life is now vastly enriched although there is no apparent change in his circumstances:

A man of high standing in the town, I paraded
Spent highways, raising not an echo, only dust.³⁹

Dust to dust, the intimation of eternal extinction. Again in two lines Webb uncovers the utter despair – the “sickness unto death” – at the heart of the man for the son does not journey along the road without leaving an echo. We have already seen in the life of the Leper the reverberations granted by the simplest, most tender of human acts. But the Father, bearing all the pomposity and magnificence afforded by the world of possessions, leaves no echoes, only dust. And that word bears the imprint of death, just as the Father's own “honourable” words, the words by which he rejected his son, carry the message of a corpse in its shroud:

Each of my honourable words
– He has stolen, imprison him, my son no longer my son –
Was the groping, gaining yellow signal,
And failure, the sere-cloth's moth-eaten pallor,
Printless under any advance of my craft.⁴⁰

Yet the sack-cloth worn by Francis, bitterest fibre that is Francis, passes on to raise the brilliance of the “yellow signal”, the sun. Thus the Father acknowledges his own son and, in so doing, reaches redemption for he acknowledges Francis, not simply as his son but as a saint belonging to all people, to all creation and to God. The Father no longer “owns” his son as a possession: Francis, still his son, cannot be owned, cannot be appropriated by material hubris. There is real humility in these lines:

A continent is unbound,

³⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 139.

³⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 139.

⁴⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 139.

Still of my fibres, but of countless fibres,
Still of my limits, but not of the mapping-pen's,
Still of my trademark – but of daylight and vine.⁴¹

The Father's twilight life, eclipsed by his mask of wealth and honour, has dissolved into morning and acceptance of life, the *vine* of creation and of spiritual renewal. One might even call it “ontological renewal,” for there has been a profound acceptance of his *possibility* in a true relation with that which is real, not that mockery of reality to be found in hoarding material wealth and the social power that derives from it.

Gula: the gluttony of the Wolf of Gubbio

Contrasted with the unredeemed Leper and unrepentant Father, the Wolf of Gubbio doesn't define himself in relation to social expectations or conventions at all, but remains utterly self-possessed. Yet that self-possession, while powerful like the Father, is not an ethical choosing of the self. And as a completely independent life-form, fully itself; yet also fully immanent in the impulse of the natural spirit, which removes the Wolf entirely from ethical choice. Do we take the Wolf to be the epitome of legitimacy, purely free to follow its own natural gluttony and owning to nobody? Or should we recognize pure nature of this type is only a part-formed being? This self-possession is merely the impulse of his appetites and, thus, he is as far from attaining to the ethical as every other aesthete.

I dictate to nobody, I need declare nothing,
Who might hear declarations? Only myself.⁴²

The movement of the seasons, the natural cycles, is not just a stage upon which to strut his stuff, but forms his very ontological dimensions, fulfilling the rhythms of being itself. One finds a contrast with Heidegger's shepherds living invisibly “outside the desolate earth”⁴³ in this sense of being given such precise treatment by the poet:

Ice comes to the world now and then – for it *is* the world,
My lair of fulfilment – and dictates to me,

⁴¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 139.

⁴² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 131.

⁴³ Martin Heidegger (1975) *The End of Philosophy*: 109.

Not by impulse of colour, movement, coldness,
But through my world, the open swinging doors
Lifted in the first place by winter or summer.⁴⁴

The relation to nature and the world as it is, untrammelled by illusion, is beautifully captured in that metaphor of the “open swinging doors”; they open up as one steps easily through and close behind just as easily, thus shielding the past as the future had been a moment before. The wolf lives in the ever-present now, untouched neither by memory nor by anxiety or fear of the future. There is an ease in passing across the land; an ease through keeping within the world; an ease in following the dimensions of life as they present themselves; no guilt at past misdemeanour, no fear of retribution. There is hunger. But even hunger has been swept up into the vitality of his exuberant being-in-itself. The Wolf is all appetites and nothing more.

Hunger is movement and stillness,
Hunger is coldness and warmth. What am I, then?⁴⁵

Yet this creature cannot be free to transcend the ways of nature; must always remain immanent, chained to its rhythms. Only in setting oneself at the “primal setting at a distance”⁴⁶ (Buber) can one become a figure with a world situated opposite. The chance of finding the face of God in nature (Webb’s natural theology) can surely only belong to those set at a distance. Otherwise, the self cannot hear what is spoken to it, and thus, will never reach that creative vocational moment which is true authenticity. And we grasp the Wolf in the same terms as the slave told what to do but unable to bring the command to perfection.

And who is speaking? That which is not forever
Silence tilting at words. I speak, I forget.⁴⁷

In reflection, where one reaches out to one’s creative vocation, lies that place in which we might “choose ourselves,” stepping from the aesthetic state of mere appetites into the ethical realm. But the Wolf of Gubbio can never attain to this becoming while he remains purely

⁴⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 131.

⁴⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 131.

⁴⁶ Martin Buber (1965b) *The Knowledge of Man*: 60.

⁴⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 132.

immanent. The wolf does not live in time but exists solely in a timeless circuit dominated by his appetites. Redemption as an event can only come in the space created by existing in time. Otherwise in the negation of the before and the after in which redemption has its proper situation, all lost in the great forgetting, the wolf lives in a state of unconsciousness; possibly also in a state of unconscious despair because there can be no change. All change is a return to the same; all appetites an antinomy negating itself – “Hunger is movement and stillness, /Hunger is coldness and warmth.” No need for invoking direction; no direction for one’s desires which in themselves might have engendered some hope, some sense of the future fulfilment and thus of time. The Wolf remains incomplete, mistaking his immanent temporality and immediate reaction for life itself. He is barely alive, barely situated, except in a stoic nihilism not of his own choosing.

Situation, like redemption, can only come from acknowledging time but time itself can only come into being when the self steps out of its forgetful oblivion in pure immanence and separates itself, in order to become an exclusive being *over against the world*, not solely and solitarily within it. Therefore, in this poem Webb grants us a vision of a negative phenomenology of existence, the “in-itself” (*En-soi*), which is yet to become existential, “for-itself” (*Pour-soi*). But he will have to go further, much further. Redemption for the Wolf will come when that divide is crossed and he emerges from his thrownness into time. His redemption will arise only in that ethical realm where he *chooses himself* as a being set over against other beings, in their exclusivity, rather than marking them as instruments for assuaging the Wolf’s hunger.

Introduced by St. Francis’s praise of *Brother Fire*, the Wolf’s attainment of redemption in Part Three belongs to the fire, similar to the “fire” that turned Pascal from the God of Descartes’ arid proofs to the living “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob.”⁴⁸

Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for our brother the Fire!

⁴⁸Pascal.(1966) *Pensées*: 309.

*By means of it Thou dost illumine the night, and it is pleasant and joyous and robust and strong.*⁴⁹

The Wolf recognizes that his solitary supremacy is really empty and meaningless. He encounters Francis's troupe as they walk out to talk to him.⁵⁰ Against this joyous gathering, the Wolf has no answer but to desire to journey with them, to gather the world around him; the world now no longer merely the vehicle for his immanence but a world properly over against him:

No match for a singing convoy: Silence, fall back.
Cluster round me, world, tie a bell to my neck.⁵¹

He finds he is now living, authentically alive: "Now as always the alive, and furred with speed; /No more the silent non-living." But that means he must also acknowledge his vulnerability: "Only I may bleed." His morally bankrupt power of previous non-life was inflicted upon his hapless victims to feed the hunger of his appetites. Admitting vulnerability is to take notice of finitude. Finitude is something that the powerful only acknowledge in others. Moreover, his vulnerability extends to recognizing in his past inauthentic state that he was always motivated by fear: Fear of hunger, fear of the villagers' retribution. But with the intercession of Francis, he now need fear no more the pangs of hunger or retribution from the villagers he has so dominated without conscience: They promise to feed and forgive him for his reign of terror in return for leaving them in peace.

No more fear. Now all's a twig to my fire:
Spread before me, children, meat of a fearless stare.

For my dish, grand lady, your laughing fearless voice.
Only I may drink here, only I may rejoice.⁵²

The heroic couplets of this poem are stark and simple but they carry a wealth of implied meaning other than simply telling the story of how St Francis tamed a vicious beast, one of the

⁴⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 139.

⁵⁰ Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria (1998) *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*: 47.

⁵¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 139.

⁵² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 140.

iconic stories in the collection *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi* that informs Webb's "Canticle." The responses that are called for by the Wolf are now no longer villager retribution or divine judgment. They are natural responses, the face of God in the storm, in the seasons and in the winter ice:

Summer, ice, thunderbolt, come: you are the immense
World of my imposition, you are response.⁵³

And above all, the forgetfulness that marked his aesthete's life in the ever-present now of unauthenticity has been thrust aside by the awakening of his memory. He must remember, for his penance depends upon his remembering:

Night on my axis, weep, sing, be leisurely, strive.
I forget nothing. There is no other Alive.⁵⁴

Capitalized as a proper noun, "Alive" most likely indicates the Wolf's acceptance of *this life* entailed in remembrance. He is now more alive than he's ever been. He cast aside his power over the country to become penitent and alive, gathering the world to himself. And that is the aspect of remembering that yields the greatest benefit for the Wolf, because as the first stanza of the poem tells, remembering brings the world directly opposite – i.e., facing – the creature, who is now no longer a pure immanence, such that the Wolf might turn towards the world and truly encounter it. This form of *distantiation* need necessitate neither negation nor alienation. The Wolf's alienation grew from dwelling in the intentional oblivion of forgetfulness. He now belongs to the world and it to him because it is now set over against him. This is his existential condition. And the fire? The Wolf is the fire.

Luxuria: the lechery of the Jongleur

The travelling minstrel of Part One gives himself to serving those who engage him for entertainment. Unlike the balladry of the Father, this singer is all lyricism. Yet it seems we are presented quite unmistakably with another of Kierkegaard's *aesthetes*. For the Jongleur sings of

⁵³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 140.

⁵⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 140.

all sweetness and light, augmenting his subjects with smoke and mirrors where true existence has no place. That sense of ethical exploration, a hallmark of modern lyricism, is missing from the minstrel's repertoire. Even here, in a being so different from the brutal Wolf filling his momentary appetites without thought, living nothing but pure *necessity*, the Jongleur exists in a timeless realm of ethereal imagery without foundation in facticity; he is pure *possibility* without any connection to his necessity. According to Kierkegaard, that is also a state of despair.⁵⁵ He too might sing of the salvation of characters in his song – when, for example, the hero always rescues the maiden – but he is as far from attaining that redemption for himself as the Wolf. He is yet to be an exclusive person beyond the abstract delights of his song.

O city, be radiant, flutter your wings!
Listen, listen: far hoofbeats foretell noon-hour,
Your wine and gossip with the languid sufferings
And happy endings. But not yet –
Nothing to you is unannounced. And I speak as a man.⁵⁶

He speaks as a man, like the Father did, although his speaking voice is neither the determinism of Bernadone nor the fatalism of the Wolf but the empty song of ungrounded possibility. Kierkegaard wrote most appositely:

In possibility everything is possible. For this reason, it is possible to become lost in possibility in all sorts of ways. [...] Legends and fairy tales tell of the knight who suddenly sees a rare bird and chases after it, because it seems at first to be very close; but it flies [off] again, and when night comes, he finds himself separated from his companions and lost in the wilderness where he now is. So it is also with desire's possibility. Instead of taking the possibility back into necessity, he chases after possibility—and at last cannot find his way back to himself.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 35-7.

⁵⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 132.

⁵⁷Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 37.

The Jongleur's song is a very beautiful monologue but, although lyrically at ease, it is still vehemently self-referential, distant from touching the other being/s over against him except in his role as entertainer:

I sing only as a myth.
Breathtaking profile of granite, but the chisel's art
Fell short of blood and bone and beating heart.⁵⁸

This is the world of the fairytale where death is glorious and grieving widows and orphans receive the riches commensurate with their grief. The "good" vanquish the "evil." And love comes resplendent in the form of beautiful young suitors or maidens, set in timeless splendour without the ordinary changes wrought by nature and time upon our frame: age, accident, sickness, infirmity. Yet the Jongleur is sufficiently aware that he realizes these unchanging crystals do not grasp the threads of reality nor create an adequate dialogue with people to be anything more than shallow entertainments, pleasurable in the moment, nothing more:

Sing! But the chanson wavers, cannot consume
My defiance new and lonely as St Damian's bell.
Granted, its theme may control
My lodgings in place, language, or time:
There remains
Under old trophies and rainbows the frail gesture
Bound to language nor place nor time.⁵⁹

No true situation but ethereal pictures painted by words without location on earth or in time. And, therefore, time, so necessary to the Wolf's redemption, lies also at the heart of the Jongleur's inability to encounter reality in his song. Consequently, the singer is in despair because his song, his tool in trade, cannot bring grace to his life nor break his monological isolation in loneliness: he sings the predictable song but hears no answering voice returning to him: "— now for stagecraft of the fingers, /And the costumed syllables. /In their adequate soaring,

⁵⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 132.

⁵⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 132.

declension.” We now grasp the vital fact that poetry when it is nothing but an entertainment is just this sort of Bad Faith; one takes on the flourishes of the poet’s craft without loyalty to the meaningful lyric, thereby priming the abyssal distance between possible appearances and their true necessity.

Let the cheers of the crowd
– Lover, dotard, cripple, bawd –
Work within me as a prayer,
From my borrowed instruction instruct me. Noon session boils
Together monument and change. O receive, receive
What comes of your pot-stirring, soothsayer.
*Believe, believe, believe.*⁶⁰

What a cry of despair is there, disclosed in that line: “*Believe, believe, believe*”? For it is as clear that although he wants to believe in something, the Jongleur is as cynical as only to have “belief” as a show and not within his heart. His Bad Faith basically enacts a lie. This lie is his very identity, when of course he is as distant from that identity as if the most bitter abyss lay in the tiny but vast gap in between. He sings as the song demands he should sing but he despairs. He wants to speak as a person in his exclusiveness to another person:

Wide-open mouth and bunting and drum
Endorse some momentary, tireless, militant maker.
I sing as that maker directs. May I speak as a man.⁶¹

The question of the final sentence – “May I speak as a man” – is barely audible as a question. It remains unasked; on the cusp of being asked, but still a vague statement without power to affirm himself “as a man.” He sings as he is directed, but his singing, as he himself, is in despair. How different is his complex but meaningless lyric from the lyric honesty of the saint’s singing. Francis sung of his joy in thanks for the world, out of the place where he walked; the Jongleur has no joy but merely the appearance of joy. The song is not of his joy, but only

⁶⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 133.

⁶¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 133.

there to serve entertainment's narrative. It is the simplicity of Francis's humanity that shines like a beacon beside the forgettable flourishes of this entertainer's craft.

In Part Three, he who was bound to the despair of dwelling within the embellishments of fairy-tale possibility without any necessity in it, acknowledges time and his own reality in time, his ultimate finitude. His voice transforms into the medium for divine lyric as he faces, at last, the bright light of the sacred, made real for him through his response to the saint – “response” intrinsic to *responsibility*, as Martin Buber has pointed out:

Responsibility presupposes one who addresses me primarily, that is, from a realm independent of myself, and to whom I am answerable. He addresses me about something that he has entrusted to me and that I am bound to take care of loyally. He addresses me from his trust and I respond in my loyalty or refuse to respond in my disloyalty, or I had fallen into disloyalty and wrestle free of it by the loyalty of the response. To be so answerable to a trusting person about an entrusted matter that loyalty and disloyalty step into the light of day (but both are not the same right, for now loyalty, born again, is permitted to conquer disloyalty)—this is the reality of responsibility.⁶²

The Jongleur is now located, not merely as the “maker *directs*” but with his very being:

Now, word and wit are ashine, and as one;
Centre the extreme light, itself the halyards
Of its hoisted radiance, yet calling,
For all their distance and debate of intensity,
Loyalty from those merchant images.
Under the loose, cranky wheel of our time
Coming, perhaps coming again.⁶³

Is there a hint of Nietzsche's *eternal recurrence of the same* here in the line “Coming, perhaps coming again,” or are we being ushered into the secret possibility of the Second Coming? The man speaks truly using the reality he experiences in his everyday life, “those merchant images,” for the metaphors in his song. He now speaks as a man, no longer singing

⁶²Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 45.

⁶³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 140.

words for entertainment alone but as communication with the words fulfilling their need for dialogue. He has attained salvation in the fine balance between necessity and possibility that underlies freedom from despair. Where the Wolf had to obtain possibility from out of his throwntness loitering beneath a solid boundary of necessity, the Jongleur has had to discover the grounded necessity that will give ontological weight to those fairy realms of his empty possibility. Francis Webb's poetry here in this poetic cycle is complex and subtle but it well serves the forms of despair and their transcendence in individual existential redemption, the gift of a simple but loving gesture from a saint on the road.

The minstrel sings. And he sings again the same songs, the same stories. But how he has changed. Now his singing has changed. And with an honesty that brings colour to every rendered note. The old omissions, the colours in his singing, have been brought to fruition through the being of the singer. The word and wit, the song and the singer, are as one. He fulfils his true vocation to sing.

Now, Time's gallant refusal to clear his throat
Before the old stories, the old omissions:
Red that goes pleasantly with wineglass fables
Where the dead grape's dismemberment would be ill-mannered;
Blue of the easy alms and nice perspective;
Retirement, accurate yellow fencing of lightnings
In a steep poetic court whistling applause;
Love, always love.⁶⁴

When he speaks of sleep – But of what sleep does he speak? The sleep of death spoken by Shakespeare's Hamlet? – the Jongleur speaks as the man he is, he who has travelled and experienced the sleep of the wayfarer and seen death.

Now to sleep. And sleep is the old story,
But spoken by a man and a seafarer;
This time of sleeping is time of full account,
Five senses up and about, and all things logged.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 140.

Is this perhaps the story of St. Francis himself? The early life of ease filled with colour and pleasure and love without love, the life of an aesthete? But whose visions render him to account, show him the grimace of death, grant him the five stigmata of Christ and send him out on voyages overseas to spreading the song of God. That image of the stigmata will complete Webb's poem cycle. But whether or not we can read the story of Francis in the Jongleur's song, the curve of the medieval romance is certainly alive in these lines, of Tristan and Isolde. The hero's courtly life, the sudden passionate love, the dream that brings all his sins to account and the finality of his death in the arms of his beloved, who will die her love-death, glorying in her love, unrepentant of her own sins:

Yes, the death was illustrious:
There are also bones. A few yards are no scabbard.
Love, even love,
Under her wrongs may be inartistic, uncouth,
Move when she should be still, her voice in tatters,
Hair befogged, mouthline a guttering, out of the sun.⁶⁶

"Freed from the story, come closer and still closer." That line tells us so much. He is now freed from the story he has been telling; his audience is now freed from his story. Yet he now stands fully himself whereby the true encounter with him is now possible. He is alive to the possibilities of real human intercourse.

Acedia: the despair of the Serf

The Serf does not speak very much at all. He is taciturn and stoic; accustomed to receiving the word of command from his master than speaking his own words. Aside from his role as a serf, there is not much else to indicate that he has a being other than his role. He is bound in an imponderable and crushing *necessity* without any *possibility*. In this respect, he lives in Bad Faith like the Jongleur, though his is a different kind of illegitimacy. He relates to the earth in an elemental manner, but he takes no responsibility for himself.

⁶⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 141.

⁶⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 141.

Words move uneasily within the grain. I feel the move
Uneasily, for it is out of season
In any month and would propose a load
To shoulderblades whose groynes and outcroppings,
Mating the oats, the cockerels, the rains,
And all their regular dunnage, take to it
Less kindly, this late bid for their embrace.⁶⁷

His antipathy towards words reveals the purely reactive relation he has with language. For this man there is no poetry, only work, backbreaking work, the menial service of one who acknowledges language only as a prelude to action, nothing more. All grace comes from his master. The ownership of serf by a master is obsequiously enacted by the Serf, conceiving the social structure to be one of nature, not of imposition. Hierarchy structures his universe. That figure of Francis, who cuts through these hierarchies deftly from top to bottom by plunging out of the propertied class to the lowest rung of all on the social ladder amongst the outcasts, has yet to address such men as this, living their lives in a silent emptiness, bowing and scraping before privileged Lords. The Lord has his way, his moods, whether quarrelsome or easy-going, whipping the serfs, their bent backs always subservient. But this too remains understood as being but the “natural order”, the necessity, into which he was born and bred and it must be carried stoically and without demur. And if he suffers injury as a direct consequence of the master’s command, that is just the way things are. He will bear it with equanimity. This is the brute fact of his reality. The orders given, the serfs carry them out, enacting in a strange but pitiful mimicry of the Creation in *Genesis*:

Now, now (within eyeshot) moonshine at high noon,
Furrow a green waterway by night,
Danger not of the god – danger unarmed.
I have no words: I am a man, and silent.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 134.

⁶⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 134.

But unlike God, who speaks the world into existence (“Let there be light!”), the serf keeps silent for the words were not spoken by him nor through him but *to him*. His is no resistance, no speck of awareness that halts, if only for a moment, at the border between thought and action to reflect the face of authentic humanity. Perhaps he has been made in the “image of God” like Adam, but there is nothing divine in this brute existence. For a man without words can never aspire to the redemption or possibility wrought by poetry. Neither does he have the excuse of the Wolf, who was prey to his own appetites. The Serf is bound to fulfil the whims and appetites of others and is, therefore, even further from redemption, from salvation, from authenticity, than the Wolf. He is more lost in soul than any so far to grace Webb’s “The Canticle.” In this he reflects Kierkegaard’s despair from living in crushing necessity without possibility.

How different the obsequious Serf from him of Part Three transformed into something altogether nobler, for like “our sister the Water” he is “most useful, humble, precious, and chaste.” For the Serf too changes, although his situation remains as it always has. These short verses do not speak as much as describe:

Quiet, not words, plotting within the grain.
If anything came at all, it was only the usual:
Wife, water, and sleep, harvest and nightfall,
Nothing to erode the ear, divert the vein,
If anything came at all.⁶⁹

The rhythms of his life have barely changed but now the defining moment is his vision of the world, not the barked commands of some oppressive potentate. He is alive to the movements of nature. He is the one who sees. He too owns his vision, no longer dominated by the powerful; no longer *allowed* to be dominated by the powerful; no longer, indeed, in allowing himself be dominated by the powerful.

Who is it sees from desert to ripe trees,
A river, truly a river: no bridge, no boundaries

⁶⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 141.

Nor left/right guardsmen, but the miracle of a course?
I am the one who sees.⁷⁰

What does he see? He sees the truth of nature, now set opposite him. He sees that nature is not at the mercy of Lordly power. Above all, he sees the “miracle of a course”; a world of possibility. And what is the “course” if it is not a river? What kind of river are we being asked to reflect upon? A river “from desert to ripe trees,” perhaps the water of life, perhaps life itself in all its glory, now the Creation is not parodied, as it was in Part One, but spoken as the divine Word. His vision, once obsequiously locked upon the earthly power of the nobility, now sees reality in all its transformational possibility. And in seeing that possibility, the Serf situates himself in the gap between desert and ripe tree, for he is the husbandman of the water that brings life to the desert, making it flourish. Thus, he partakes of God’s Creation.

Superba: the pride of the Knight

The converse to the Serf is the Knight, probably the former’s Lord and master. Where the Serf lived in despair because he took no responsibility for his commands, the Knight lives in despair because he takes no responsibility for his actions. Nothing checks and balances his Knightly authority. No other stands opposite him, face to face. In many respects, the Knight lives too much in the past. While the Wolf and the Serf had no memory and therefore, did not live in time at all, the Knight lives only in memory and depends upon it to provide his *raison d’être*. In his play-acting he is unable to enter into that living dialogue with a *Thou*, a person standing over against him. People around him are instruments to use according to his will. This man who has everything, has nothing, not even himself, because there is no other to re-affirm his existence except as a mask, an image of a man, but only an image, an effigy of a man. Once again, the “hollow man” of Eliot comes to mind, for he too is but the effigy of a man, like the Guy atop the bonfire on Guy Fawkes Night.

Dreams – a young man’s dreams? On my solemn oath
These have been lived; these made entire an earth,

⁷⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 141.

For all its numbness, ready
At their summons to urge forth
Young dream and dream – a steeping of the unsteady
Shoreline, tidal laying out of the thin eddy.⁷¹

His stately home – or is he describing himself ? – filled with conceit as it advertises his power across the domain that he calls his own, yet this display speaks only of assigning situation to things already situated. He too is assigned a place. That place really assigns him to it, much as he might brag otherwise. Nothing can withstand the Knight's profound hubris. With his wealth he buys the services of others to perform for him. He has no skill of his own. He treats each display of excess with little intimacy, little sense of his own participation, little but the most mediocre understanding of involvement. He is yet another kind of Kierkegaard's aesthete. With gold he outdoes the efforts of those who must sing for themselves, treating every situation with the keen eye of the hawk, employing his trained hawks to bring the quarry down, including buying the peacock's display to gather the objects of lust to himself, letting no other obtain this prey. His is an easy, far too easy access to blandishment where everything can be bought with gold, even "love":

And to you, lady, fell my young golden Yes.
For the hollow tarnished jinglings of the burgess
I gave you the troubadour's crying
In gold, with a knowingness
Like the trained hawk's, true to his pivot, whose flying
Leaves unscanned not a stanza of daylight, living to dying.⁷²

How then should this man relate to those inhabitants who dwell inside his fiefdom: the poor, the gathered crowds of ordinary folk, the little houses of wattle-and-daub that contrast so pitifully with his lofty towers, or even the suppliant enemy, whom the Knight has defeated and brought low:

Today, then, shall I be perplexed by the swarms

⁷¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 135.

⁷² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 135.

Of roadside images flung from the uncalendared dreams?
By this woman whose gaze is token
Of a passing, by this room's
Mud and wattle under my hooves, by this broken
Foeman's lisps, word of what is unspoken?⁷³

Here Webb reflects that recurring theme of twentieth-century philosophy – Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and Carl Rogers, as far back as Feuerbach – a concern for the relation with a *Thou*. For the Knight, no other person can be a *Thou*:

This creature is not the You, not the rhymer.
This wall could not carry the fresco pledged to summer
Nor appease the lickings of fire.⁷⁴

Everything before him is arbitrated according to his desires and thus can never be a *Thou*. He lives totally and completely in the technical realm of the *It*, even in his intimate relations with his lady; she was bought like all his conquests and gained at second hand. His conquest of her is as calculated as Kierkegaard's "A Seducer's Diary" (*Either/Or*).⁷⁵ And as the law, he can treat everyone as he pleases without fear of retribution. But this man remains profoundly tied to the technical realm of *It* in himself with no possibility of gaining any form of redemption from this state which is ultimately, even if unconsciously, a state of despair.

None of the characters so far can ever encounter that transforming love while they stay confined to the aesthete's many boundaries. Each one, whether consciously or no, is in a state of despair, distanced from the warmth of true human fellowship. Each suffers, even the Knight and the wealthy merchant, Francis's Father, though materially they want for nothing. This is the paradox of human existence: social success does not bring love.

Like the wind, in Part Three the Knight dismounts and faces the world directly. Now no mere role play lived in Bad Faith, the Knight stands facing reality removing the barrier that he erected between himself and his life:

⁷³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 135.

⁷⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 135.

⁷⁵ Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 243-376.

Slashing the canvas of dreams, I have entered the dream
And dismount within it, observing, not from the stirrup,
Its signs and seconds, truthful core of the idyll,
Pilot of morning, core of my green vows,
Setting the pulse awake in a young man's dreams.⁷⁶

Dream? Yes, but he has entered his dream, living within it. Idyll? Yes, but he has found the truthful core at its heart. He has awoken to himself the dreams of his youth, urging him to authenticity. But these are not simply the joyful dreams of the pleasurable image; rather it is the truthful core of the idyll:

All beauty, all joy? Yes – and all pain and disfigurement.⁷⁷

Even the face of Francis is at first a face amongst others, all there to pander to his wants as knight; no sense of his humanity. But then came the encounter that will change the Knight:

Afternoon brought a poor man walking, a man
Above and below my reverie. Words together:
I could speak, did speak, but there was time of listening.⁷⁸

For a man only used to giving orders, the fact that he *spoke* to a “poor man” and, even more improbably, *listened* to him reveals that the Knight was already aware of his despair and that the possibility for answering it had already arrived. His transmutation begins and is completed by evening. The Knight remembers the face of his vows (to God, perhaps?) and gains a moment of profound serenity conversing with this young man. He meets the faces that were once tilted upward to his disdainful gaze cast downward from the saddle, now on the same level, face-to-face. He enters into what Kierkegaard would describe as the “ethical” stage in knowledge of good and evil, of the evil he himself has committed, laying waste the land. And he comes to know Francis as a *Thou*, and where once he strove to be first, to win the battle, the joust, the game of life, he understands at last that his very way has not elevated him but has sunk him

⁷⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 142.

⁷⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 142.

⁷⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 142.

deeper into the mire. No longer “noble-born” over others, he realizes his humility: “[...] and in the last place myself.”⁷⁹

The breath, the πνευμα, the spirit: respiration, inspiration, spirituality; these are words that share a common bond in metaphor. Breathing is life. In Webb’s typical shorthand, Francis, the saintly young man, represents the divine life, the spiritual centre, expressed in these two simple lines.

Ira: the wrath of Brother Ass

There is considerable compassion in Webb’s depiction of Brother Ass, although the sole beast of burden in the poem cycle, he is the only character to bear the title “Brother.” Webb cannot impart Brother Ass without revealing the donkey’s thankless journey, his ordinary trials and tribulations in the load he carries, the road on which he walks, the rasping of the saddle and the sting of the whip, and his wrath in nagging “at the short rein /By stealth or openly, straggling, jibbing.”⁸⁰ Nothing is planned; he must take it as it comes, even his feed. The stables are draughty; the lazar-houses – poor-houses set aside for lepers away from the major thoroughfares – his idea of paradise; a paradise away from the winds and where the grass, live grass, always grows the longest.

There must be a rider, I am alive
And evening will not empty the stirrup, and the voice
Cursing above me must always seem the same
As my famished earthen bray, and the lazar-houses
Offside must be always my Eden – the genuine
Grasses, inveterate mildness . . .⁸¹

Brother Ass bears this a little reluctantly but fatalistically. He typifies the fatalist of Kierkegaard’s description, who lives in despair because he has bound himself into the absolute necessity with only sufficient imagination to realize his ongoing predicament. Michael Griffith believes this is the voice of Francis of Assisi himself and it is true the saint referred to his body

⁷⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 143.

⁸⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 136.

⁸¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 136.

as “Brother Ass.” One might perhaps also see the word “ass” inscribed in the name of St. Francis’s fabled town “Assisi.” Yet the reality of the ass’s life is treated with such assurance that I am less inclined to read this as an allegory for the saint but really as its title suggests. When we come to the next poem, the sole poem of Part 2, it is as clear that Francis, who is now himself speaking with good humour and charity faces his charge and relates to him fully as a true *Thou*, understanding what it is that puts the poor beast in discomfort. Here there will be neither harsh voices nor whiplashes. It is this relation that is surely disclosed by the very title of the last poem of Part 1: “Brother Ass,” for who else but Francis would recognize in this fellow beast a *brother*, the speech of a man who is open to such a relation? And as that man, more human than any other, the example is set for the transformation that comes when one enters into relation, thus becoming more fully an authentic self. And we will see how St. Francis in his actuality, within the concrete situation, answers the ass and in his response takes responsibility for the relation, the ground of all ethical judgment according to Martin Buber.

The ill-treatment of Brother Ass, whipped in the first poem, is here restrained by the sole poem of Part Two, which preceded all other poems of legitimate existence. Each character, I have dealt with as a whole, directly following each statement of their aestheticism with the person they became upon encountering the saint. Certainly this poem can be interpreted in an allegorical manner. It carries this ambiguity, certainly and with clarity. But once again I am not inclined to agree to such an interpretation because of the gentle compassion in the speaking subject. Isn’t this St. Francis himself speaking? Though “un-asinine ten toes” does ambiguously imply something other, or at least more, than a donkey. But that too could easily be a metaphor for setting out beside the donkey to suffer the road with him:

Come, Brother, turn your full pitiful sweep of nose
That flowers as a nostril, not at all as a rose,
And all your little un-asinine ten toes

Towards what is at last off your back and is standing by
To lead you home, to muster up Italy

For the rich greenfares of Lady Poverty.⁸²

In these words, I believe, we grasp the sense of deepest sympathy for Brother Ass as a fellow creature. St. Francis walks beside the beast leading him forward, but the interplay of identity, swinging between standing opposite the animal, as it were, – “Come, Brother, turn your pitiful sweep of nose” – yet identifying with him – “And all your little un-asinine ten toes” – recognizes the need to be able to understand the being before you as a *Thou* through knowing and being present before him as a self, an *I*. That is, the ontological moment, when both St. Francis and Brother Ass come fully into being, arises in the dialogical present; in time, in the now where past and future both meet. There is also freedom to be themselves that is what the true dialogical moment brings: one being to another, each relating as himself, not in the form of a predetermined role, nor in a power relation (e.g. master to slave) in which one, and one only, dominates the other’s servitude. Certainly there feels to be that “letting be” spoken by Heidegger, but that is much too passive. St. Francis affirms the being of Brother Ass and in so doing, affirms his own existence:

Prance, play up as you will – it is lovely weather
Frisking beside us, melting us truly together.
Off with the belly band and the stirrup-leather!

Once in my vacant boyhood, it came to pass
You were given your empty head – O silly Ass!
Grass is the thing for you, good nourishing grass.⁸³

“Pleasure is a freedom-song,” wrote Kahlil Gibran⁸⁴ In this communion between man and beast, the voice of Francis gently rebukes Brother Ass, yet he does not rein him in but lets him have his head, as he had as an idle youth. He knows what the Ass needs and desires and that knowledge gives him pleasure. The recognition of his own youthful folly allows the saint to

⁸² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 137.

⁸³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 137.

⁸⁴ Kahlil Gibran (1926) *The Prophet*: 83.

identify that which is personal and sacred in the donkey, realizing that we approach the mystery of the other through a profound and intimate knowledge of the mystery in the self.

Whatever the donkey likes, he may give voice to the moment of redemption in any manner he wants, for in their joy the loads become as nothing and they are all moving quickly with ease. This poem is not as simple as it might first appear. Yes, St. Francis is there beside the donkey, speaking to him. And yes, he notes the pleasure of the morning, letting the donkey kick up his heels. But the joy of the morning is redemption for the soul of beast and man alike, where all loads are born with ease, with joy.

And the multitudes! – wrong face, strong face, long face –
For the greatest Host and the gaieties of Grace.
Bray, brag, whichever you like: we are setting the pace.⁸⁵

The saint's love for the donkey lets him know the beast and speak for him. Yet the saint speaks with humility before his Brother for his own salvation depends as much on the donkey and the sun as his does for them. This poem is, I believe, the linchpin of the whole cycle, allowing us to swing from the despair and illegitimacy of Part One to the redemption and authenticity of Part Three for each person. And how that redemption occurs through the very human acts of embracing, kissing, talking and listening, walking, taking joy in the other with the deepest, lightest love.

The poetry of redemption

The concluding part of Webb's *Canticle* is made of four extremely short poems from characters and voices not yet spoken. These are intimate with the saint. Two are female, the first women to speak, yet who are so important in Francis's life that it is difficult to imagine leaving them out of the saint's story: his mother and St. Clare. The other two are male but also of prime importance: his earthly companion brother and his heavenly companion the sun. Throughout these poems, poetry is cast as the source of his beatification and, therefore, his gift to those in existential despair.

⁸⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 137.

His Mother grasps the brilliance of her son's faith, outshining the golden armour he wore to war. She watches with complete faith in him, more than a mother's love, it is recognition of his profound spiritual value as only the mother of a saint might know. Yet she has clearly not always acknowledged the saintliness of her son, no doubt once wanting a good, comfortable life for him as she herself chose when she married his father:

I watch him again tonight,
One sure star there:
He is never out of sight
Whatever fortune tinges
Breath and air.⁸⁶

But she has changed her colour, in the sun of his spiritual significance. "Now; for its east-to-west" is the movement of the sun yet also the direction as one walks from the east entrance of the church towards the altar set in the west. Therein lies the movement from youth to old age but more importantly, from callow impiety to the wisdom of spiritual salvation. This has been St. Francis's journey and the journey of all the characters that have had the privilege of encountering the saint. And as we should expect, there is no definitive interpretation for the poem. The east-to-west movement of the sun, calls forth the image of the resurrected Christ, sunrise and sunset and sunrise again, ever-present symbol of divine life on the earth as the Word made flesh. For Webb the Word, the divine Logos, is echoed in the spoken word of the poet, in his own writing but above all in the poet saint, St. Francis.

The poem "The Companion" opens with reference to Subasio, the town from which the Benedictine monks offered the Portiuncular to Francis and his companions. We grasp the sense of very young men taking the old church for their mission with great joy. We also grasp the sense that this place acts as a hinge from the peripatetic life to the spread of the order throughout the world:

Subasio could invite
Young tread and treble, wear

⁸⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 144.

Monastery, cypress, light
To cajole his young eyes – the hinges
Of everywhere.⁸⁷

The speaker is one of Francis's companions, perhaps Bernard, who tells in his old age of the spirituality, that sense of spiritual light he sensed in Francis as he walked in his shadow. The light/dark metaphors open the possibility for even the shadow to bear this light and extend across the world. But the metaphor of the shadow is very subtle. For unlike Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, who "doth bstride the narrow world /Like a Colossus,"⁸⁸ Francis's shadow slips quietly and lightly upon the earth, yet filling the world with his humble light. That is what the companion witnesses even in his cell. For what makes the shadow but the light from the sun, the sacred light of God's love, casting the shadow of Francis upon the ground. Therein, we see the light behind the shadow, a point of paradox that reflects (itself a metaphor of light) the ontological paradox of Christ as a man amongst men and as a divine being at the same moment; the lacuna and presence in the life of the saint. And the saint who, himself, comes to represent the lacuna of the divine centre in Webb's "Canticle," where we see him only as he is a presence for others, even as he speaks gently to Brother Ass, a shadow that brings forth light.

St. Clare ministers to the dead, as she was commanded, not begrudgingly as a duty but with delight, with joy. Yet the Door of the Dead also implies that this is a religious office, an act of piety, for that doorway could as well be the altar at the west end of the church. Her encounters with Francis dispose her to joy and hope. The image of the hand that rolled timbers from the doorway, like the hand that rolled the stone from the tomb, tells of the rebuilding of the old church undertaken by Francis in both the real and the figurative senses.

There was a hand that rolled
Timbers from the doorway, stressed
A warm Word that arranges

⁸⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 144.

⁸⁸ William Shakespeare (1930) "Julius Caesar" in Craig, W. J. ed. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*: I, ii, 135-5: 950.

Kindling from thorns and cold.⁸⁹

The writing is concise, almost terse, but it carries with it a wealth of allusion from the Word as a proper noun, thus identifying the divinity of Christ (the divine Logos) is fulfilled in her ministrations, to the crown of thorns, transforming a torture instrument of dreadful horror and suffering into a source of existential comfort and redemption. They were not afraid to suffer. Their suffering allowed them to confront the truth of existence in death, in pain and discomfort without flinching and, more importantly, even with joy. It is not the fact of suffering that represents evil but meaningless suffering.

The moment when St. Francis gains the five stigmata and writes the *Canticle of the Sun*, is related in “The Sun” with such simplicity that, like the poems prior to this, it is almost terse. Yet, also like the others, this language is rich with allusion and dense with metaphor that weaves a profoundly meaningful tapestry invested with spiritual and earthly value. The sun is the heavenly orb lighting our day but also our spiritual path to God. The sun is also Francis himself bringing the light of God to the inhabitants of our world.

Like the final poem of D. H. Lawrence’s poem cycle *The Ship of Death*, the rising sun is harbinger of a profound transformation: “The flood subsides, and the body, like a worn sea-shell/ emerges strange and lovely.”⁹⁰ We are filled with expectation for a miraculous event. The day starts as it usually does. Nothing yet in outward appearances to indicate what day this really is. And the man is as he usually appears to be, yet what man is this?

The honest blue and the rainward treason,
The ball of pride and plan
Skittling vapours in damp collusion,
These are only the man.⁹¹

But the events began in the night when one should expect both sun and man to be absent, either not gracing the sky or asleep. The language sanctifies the sun and man by the use of the

⁸⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 145.

⁹⁰ D. H. Lawrence (1977) *The Complete Poems*: 720.

⁹¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 145.

collective word “we”: “But five times we shall rise in the night /When the halo over the hill /Is not of my light.”⁹² The announcement of what happened is granted without fanfare or ornamentation by the single line, yet it resounds with the great organ notes of lyric verse:

Five Wounds, and the Canticle.⁹³

But in this single line we grasp the enormity of what is being spoken into existence for the spiritual substance rendered upon the flesh of a man acts as a sign for another event of sacrifice over a millennium before. Webb eschews all superlatives and hyperbole, thus granting a thunderous finality to his cycle. (I, of course, may use superlatives and hyperbole to unlock the significance of these few, stark lines!) Yet though without ornament, the gravity of what he speaks is emphasized by making his words proper nouns: “Five Wounds and the Canticle.” These are not mere wounds amongst other wounds; not merely a song amongst other songs. They gain cosmological importance; they gain historical moment. In short they locate the body of a man into an entirely new spiritual ontology, thus making it possible for all humanity to enter on a journey through their desolation towards the poetry of redemption, embarking on an ever-present quest for authenticity.

G. K. Chesterton’s assessment of St Francis of Assisi as a “poet whose whole life was a poem” is given its most poetic yet down-to-earth expression in Webb’s poem cycle “The Canticle.” Bill Ashcroft identifies the figure of St. Francis in the cycle as representing the presence of the “infinite in life.” That recognition of *infinite being* correlates with the profound discovery of Kierkegaard’s *ethical* realm in which the finite person, once bound solely to a temporal existence (the aesthete’s life) like the inauthentic characters of Part Two, eventually finds his/her eternal self, as in Part Three. This, however, does not mean the ethical realm is divorced from the temporal world in which we live as if it were a cloud divorced from the ground across which it floats. It is rather the *infinite in life*, the eternal that makes that temporal world *meaningful*. Now, poetry as enrichment also brings the brute fact of a meaning into the

⁹² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 145.

⁹³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 145.

light of the meaningful through an encounter with the infinite in life, which is the *mystery* that belongs to the substrate of poetic being, the point of its relevance in disclosing the mystery in ourselves. Francis Webb, in making the *poet saint* the focus around which he spins his “Canticle,” affirms the fundamental values of poetry itself through its own archetypical representative. This spiritual centre marries the ordinary levels of objective meaning to the personal levels of the meaningful in mystery in precisely the same way as poetic enrichment, thus marking the significant value attained by poetry in bringing the ontological mysteries to fruition for us and for the religions of the world. True religion, the spark of the spiritual in our daily lives, is made possible through the intervention of poetry and its attendant enrichment.

St. Francis, as the fierce centre, is something more than Kierkegaard’s “ethical” centre, though that is what he makes possible for the lives of those around him. He attains the *religious* stage that transcends the ethical, as a reminder to the rest of us that our ordinary existence is wholly and justifiably inadequate while it continues to ignore spiritual being. Once again, that does not imply the religious stage is divorced from the ethical or aesthetic life, but contains them and brings them to an apotheosis in becoming meaningful. Around this fierce centre orbits the poetry of each person, first as the unredeemed person, limited and in despair, then redeemed through encountering the very humanity of this most gentle of saints. What is significantly divine in him is his humanity brought to an extraordinary conclusion with the stigmata of Christ written on his human, all too human flesh and the human canticle of wonder and joy which still resonates many hundreds of years later. Through each character the encounter with the spiritual centre of the saint brings them into touch with the ethical sense of being a being in which their lives on this earth become an expression of their spiritual awakening to the wonder and joy of creation. And that centre, the lacuna of the absent but present saint, is the poetic embrace of the spirit with life itself.

If I have spoken so passionately about Francis Webb’s poetic cycle, although I have never once denied the agnosticism intrinsic to our so-called secular society – some might say “indifference” – it is because there is in this work a recognition of what theologian John

Macquarrie has called “holy being.” For many people the word “God” acts as a convenient shorthand for *holy being*. Although some identify God with a specific person amongst other persons, that form of narrow theism only applies to the most evangelical believer and has been disowned by more sophisticated theologies. Even for the agnostic and for certain atheists – those only opposed to the theistic path to God – *holy being* is still profoundly meaningful. On the other hand, for those of us with a faith in God, the question of holy being occurs as the “ultimate concern”⁹⁴ within our ground of being. There are many paths to God and the testimony of the poet manifests a singularly effective route. Above all, works like Francis Webb’s “Canticle” disclose the extraordinary gift of poetic enrichment that continues to serve living existence, not as a knowledge set *over there* in an objective sense – knowledge that is *about* the world – but in the making of meanings that are meaningful. Enrichment means what it says for the reader and no better example of this truth can be found than opening a relation with the poetic cycle of Webb’s “The Canticle.” I have said that this kind of knowledge invoked by the poetry is not “about” the world in the objective sense of knowing something. What kind of knowing the poem performs is far more difficult to describe, extremely fragile and vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a reader’s presence than the objective knowing that sets very little store in human fallibility or finitude. Already we have broached the two next stages of our dialectical movement – *affirmation* and *relation* – in appreciating the poetry of Francis Webb. They were there right from the beginning and have already made their presence felt. Following “The Canticle” we will explore the existential value in poetry and what the conceptual structure indicates in terms of ontological significance. These are not merely concepts. They structure the very ground of poetic being on which we all must rely if our lives might be able to return us to ourselves. That is, poetic being accomplishes the initial *return* in the fundamental ethical and religious act by which each person might *choose* him/herself in relation with holy being.

⁹⁴ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic theology* Vol 1: 14.

Theory Chapter IV

On affirmation: bearing witness in poetic testimony

Poetry brings an enrichment of its readers' lives, notably in their relation with the world and with their sense of being a being. If poetry's divergent hermeneutic circle of metaphorical incompleteness, along with the *call* to the reader's sense of being a self, were construed as purely fragmentary and solely *subjective* then this common view would covertly maintain the subject-object relation proper to critical discourse. Applying the subject-object distinction to our relation with poetry destroys something vital in both the poetry and ourselves. This chapter returns to the question of poetic integrity, showing why the subject-object and subjectivity-objectivity distinctions applied to poetry necessarily represent disruptions of the intrinsic ontological grounds upon which poetry and upon which the self are based.

This chapter will perform another interlineal dialectic manoeuvre in a manner similar to the previous theory chapter on enrichment. That is, incompleteness, as the primary stage, and mystery, as the first dialectical stage, created a space of possibility between them that, aside from the obvious likeness in pattern between Gödelian incompleteness and Marceline mystery, also enables the further definition of an interaction. Enrichment was the first of these dialectical relations; affirmation stands as the second. Each marks the product of the interaction between meaning (in incompleteness) with the meaningful (of mystery); each marks a vertical dimension cutting through the many possible layers of meanings to the heart of the poem. No doubt there are other interlineal concepts that might arise in the dialectical space between the two stages but I shall focus only upon these two: the previous theory chapter on enrichment, and this chapter, on affirmation.

As we have seen, the voice of the poet brings an *expansion* of the hermeneutic circle into existence as a stepping forth into ontological mystery and the poem as a poetic axis. But we have barely touched upon the status of the words themselves in describing this complex interaction of *meaning made meaningful* by mystery. If we leave them out of our reckoning, we should have lost the poem and all that which opens the way to what is meaningful in a poem's meanings. The

poem, I will argue, proves to be an *affirmation* that plumbs the core of being's mystery and also affirms the self in relation with that mystery. This arises through the dialectical juxtaposition of poetic incompleteness and poetic mystery, just as enrichment – meaning made meaningful – resulted from the same essential juxtaposition. This, however, marks the readers response to the words of the poem in pointing into mystery. This is an enactment undertaken by the reader when a poem becomes deeply meaningful. I will commence the task of outlining what a poetic affirmation is by making an essential distinction.

Assertion

We have already described how the metaphorical statement (the *Is*) recurs within each act of interpretation. That gave us grounds to infer hermeneutic incompleteness. It also brought us to the threshold of mystery. We recognized the paradoxical *Is-not* couching the metaphoric *Is* calls for a response that cannot be preordained by the poem. And within that *Is-not*, the *Is* stands firm because it arises again and again within every new interpretation. The metaphorical *assertion* “A is B” acts as a *central axis* around which all interpretation can be said to turn. This transforms what at first appears to be a simple *assertion* by the metaphoric copula *Is* into something altogether more powerful. In the next section I will describe what this entails. I devote the current section to outlining the nature of an assertion and what implications it entails.

The term *assertion* can be applied to any straightforward, univocal or near univocal statement referring to a specific state of affairs beyond it. Without assertions, no critical discourse would be possible. Certainly science and the critical humanities would not function without their assertions. We find this model of assertion very familiar. We recognize its abundant presence in every discipline, in every aspect of our working and public lives. It inculcates itself throughout every discursive mode, including the arts. Its predominance has been evident throughout Western history, at least since the so-called scientific revolution in the Seventeenth Century. It underlies our methodologies of reasoning, business and government. Without assertion, the functions of society would be vastly different. Indeed, that they can be different has

never been seriously entertained. So omnipresent is the rule of assertion that alternative modes of being have become almost inconceivable.

The truth status of an assertion requires ascertaining by the modes of verification specific to each discipline precisely because an assertion stands aside from its object. There can never be any doubt an assertion relates to *objective data*. Its truth rises or falls on appeal to external data, as for example when a scientific *hypothesis* is subject to experimental or observational proof before it can be deemed a “theory”. Not even intense conviction can justify an assertion.¹ Data not yet discovered motivates further research. Assertion remains, as Karl Popper was wont to say, subject to falsification.² There is no assertion in formal science that cannot *in principle* be judged “true” or “false” through the elaboration and manipulation of data. That is right and proper. Science, in the modern sense, thereby gains great power of explanation from its research methodology. All scientific truths must submit to *repeated* formal judgment. Yet science, like its more ancient and traditional ally, mathematics, is capable of recognizing some of the just limits to its knowledge because of this need to test its assertions against objective reality. That is, science too can *prove* a point of undecidability beyond which it may not pass. I believe Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle in quantum physics is just such a limitation of formal decidability. Like Gödel’s famous Incompleteness Theorem in mathematics, the uncertainty principle presents a formidable challenge to proof itself. But in that sense, it tells us that *this* is what we know *although* we are fallible and yet *that* is what we *cannot* know also *because* we are fallible. Heisenberg precisely mapped the limit of human knowledge at the subatomic level. That is an extraordinary achievement. Jacob Bronowski was right to call Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle the “principle of tolerance”.³ Assertion in this context is neither mechanistic nor inhuman but dominated, even supported, by certain human values, central to scientific methodology that stands upon the very precipice of error. When science stumbles on that

¹ Karl Popper (2002) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*: 46.

² Karl Popper (2002) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*: 40ff.

³ Jacob Bronowski (1973) *The Ascent of Man*: 365.

precipice, with dignified humility it confesses its error and from that confession arises the lineaments of new objective truth. Yet science cannot pass beyond the objective field of assertion without ceasing to be science. This marks its formal limit in language. Where it strays into areas where assertion is inadequate to the task, then its pronouncements become dogmatic and false. One such area is that of religion. The pronouncement on religion in a recent book by Richard Dawkins⁴ is a case in point, in which scientific presumptions invaded a territory where they make very little sense. Another such area is poetry and the creative arts. Yet there are other areas in which we privilege scientific assertion where assertion is inadequate to the task, especially areas devoted to studying mind (psychology) and community (sociology).

Although the limits of assertion to a certain extent call for decision – for example, the uncertainty principle entails *we choose* to measure accurately either the *position* of the electron or its *momentum* but both accurately together is not possible – only a small part of the person need be present. No amount of conviction on the part of person will have the slightest impact upon the measurements undertaken. As an “observer”, the ontological status of the person remains barely acknowledged. And yet, the necessity for the researcher’s choice in experimental method does grant the researcher a particular if restricted place. The idea of the totally impartial – that is, totally objective and totally separate – observer-scientist proves to be false. Actually present is not obviously a scientist’s sense of being a being but merely a fragment of judgment which *decides* if we are to test for a wave (say, using the two-slit experiment) or a particle (employing a photon-detector). Yet, although science makes no obvious appeal to the scientist’s sense of being a being, without it no real science would be possible. Science, then, depends upon something it cannot acknowledge.

However, while the scientist assumes a thoroughly ambivalent position in science, there can be no doubt poetry directly reflects the person’s sense of being a being. But this does not entail the assertion of a pure subjectivity. Subjectivity is a product of experience on the systemic

⁴ Richard Dawkins. (2006) *The God delusion*.

level, a consequence of defining objectivity according to the so-called cognitive faculties alone. Subjectivity, therefore, carries only a partial sense of being a being that includes only the non-cognitive faculties – such as the emotions. Our being in the world disclosed by poetry cannot be reduced to this set of “subjective” non-cognitive faculties.

Affirmation

The distinction between an *affirmation* and a simple *assertion* I hold to be crucial and fundamental. Assertion and affirmation are necessarily related. An affirmation can be defined in the same manner as Marcel defined a *mystery* in terms of *problem*: *An affirmation is an assertion that projects into all its interpretative solutions thereby transcending itself as a simple assertion.* In saying this, we are confronted with values that take us well beyond the objective realm. An assertion remains separate from its interpretative solution but an affirmation brings us to the existential realm where an affirmation is *a declaration in which I take my stand*. We have already foreshadowed this.

An affirmation, in the sense in which I use this word, is altogether more profound than a simple assertion. Here the ontological status of the person assumes decisive importance. Whereas an assertion can be treated as “over there” without intrinsic implication for the person, an affirmation critically depends on personal engagement. Otherwise it remains just another assertion amongst other assertions. Exactly as a mystery is a problem that encroaches upon its own data thereby transcending itself as a simple problem, so an affirmation is an assertion that encroaches upon its own interpretation thereby transcending itself as a simple assertion. Initially we might not recognize an affirmation in what at first seems a simple assertion. But when we recognize the infinite regress of meaning, we have already transcended it in a certain way. Gabriel Marcel makes this apparent in talking of mystery, but his point is certainly pertinent to affirmation:

I see that this process takes place within an affirmation of being—an affirmation which I *am* rather than an affirmation which I *utter*: by uttering it I break it, I divide it, I am on the point of betraying it.”⁵

Therefore, the infinite regress of the affirmation in every explanatory interpretation is an *opening*, an opportunity to grasp that which in its paradox (bodily incorporating both the metaphoric *Is* with its *Is-not*) plunges to the ground of being (from which it originally arose). An affirmation is, thus, the poetic statement that opens a *clearing* to being and beings.

However, Gabriel Marcel does not claim I *necessarily* betray it by uttering it but says that I am on the *point* of betraying it. Betrayal comes when I seek to *explain* the poem in singular, definite terms, believing this assertional paraphrase will be provide a definitive and comprehensive explanation. How often have we heard ideologues thundering forth their own conceptions of Biblical poetry as dogmatic truth? Their utterances divide the poetry into what is spoken and what is left unspoken. The metaphor for this is less a “clearing” than a “watershed” in which we are posited on one side of an opposition between “*truth*” and “*misconception*.”

It might be a platitude that *a poem can only be said in the way the poet has chosen to say it* but that does not make it less true. Change but a single word and the whole work changes. Poetic integrity begins the moment language itself comes to be substantiated. That too is a truism, recognized and made diagnostic by Roman Jakobson in the *self-focusing* of the “poetic function”, no matter how little he comprehended the ontological possibilities thus liberated. He recognized how “self-focusing” generates ambiguity and alters the nature of the sign’s “referential function”, calling the process “split reference”. But he falters at the threshold to its mystery. What a vast gulf separates Jakobson’s “poetic function” of the “message” from what we recognize as a poem’s *affirmation*, an affirmation that arises only when we fully participate in its making.

The *raison d’être* of poetic affirmation lies in the mystery of *pointing towards* the being of the *Thou*, the ontological transcendence that opens up possibility of relation. An affirmation,

⁵Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “On the Ontological Mystery”: 18.

therefore, serves as a relationship like an assertion, but a qualitatively different mode of relation from assertion. An assertion maintains its objectivity and strict delineation between itself and the being of the asserter and with the being of that which is asserted. An affirmation, on the other hand, transcends objectivity (though not negating what is made available in objectivity) by engagement, critically dependent upon the *sense of being a being* of this person who affirms the poet's affirmation thereupon bringing that sense of being a being to fruition.

Yet Jakobson, amongst others, is correct to the extent that *language* also comes to be assigned validity. In all the generated complexities of meaning, in all the fragments of meaning we obtain, one thing shines through brightly and free of obscurity: the word of the poem in all its majesty. We return to it again and again. The word of the poem itself comprises the central axis, the luminous thread that links together all meanings we can generate from it. When all is said and done, the complexity of the situation owes everything to the simple present occurrence of the words and thus of the voice who speaks them. The words around which everything orbits manifest the concrete voice of the poet. The concrete voice of the poet emerges from reading and speaking the words in an affirmation, which we are able to realize through the mystery in our own sense of being a being.

Poem and performative

Who speaks? I ask again the question posed by Roland Barthes in his tongue-in-cheek paper "The Death of the Author."⁶ Therein, he tells us writing describes the ambiguous space where the voice of origin has been abolished. So: no Barthes, no poet, no personal voice at all. Barthes portrayed the "author" as a draconian *authority* serving to *qualify* all meaning, thereby forcing all interpretation to converge on a single egomaniacal image. His "author" was always meant to be a critical device decrying the portrait of a text's sole content as its author with no other meaning. However, Barthes's short occasional piece has become overblown to such an extent that its tongue-in-cheek observations are held to be absolute. Consequently, those like

⁶Roland Barthes (1977) "The Death of the Author": 142-3.

philosopher Peter Lamarque felt the need to challenge its “death thesis”. “Part of the problem,” Lamarque complained, “is that they [the exponents of the “death thesis”] are trapped by a gratuitous, and inappropriate, political vocabulary: ‘repression’, ‘authority’, ‘control’.”⁷ The poet, as we shall come to appreciate, serves as *guarantor* for the poem but that neither entails despotic control of meaning nor the poet as sole content.

We are told by Barthes, it is *discourse* that speaks. His allusion to J. L. L. Austin’s concept of “performative” was apparently intended to provide the paradigm for the abolition of the writing self. Once again, I take this to be very tongue-in-cheek because it is likely he knew his claim to be contradictory. A performative is centrally spoken or performed by an *I*, a self. Peter Lamarque explains the reason why I have come to believe Barthes has actually committed a practical joke on the critical community:

A performative utterance only counts as an act – a promise, a marriage, a declaration of war – under precisely specified contextual conditions; and one of those conditions, essential in each case, is the speaker’s having appropriate intentions. Far from being the destruction of a ‘voice of origin’ the successful performative relies crucially on the disposition and authority of the speaker. The analogy, then, to say the least, is unfortunate.⁸

The idea of the performative yields valuable insights for understanding the nature of the poetry and, therefore, will warrant a closer look. *Who speaks* in the poem is the poet. The words constituting the poem constitute the voice of the poet. And reading the poem and making that affirmation might be judged a performative in the act of accepting the poet’s words.

A “performative,” as Oxford scholar John Langshaw Austin first suggested, is the use of language in which *I speak for myself* in a very specific social context that gives the words I speak concrete power they would not otherwise have if removed from that context.⁹ For the performative, *saying* something is also a *doing* of something, such that when someone speaks the particular words certain identifiable acts are undertaken. Now I don’t want to stretch Austin’s

⁷ Peter Lamarque (1990) “The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy”: 330.

⁸ Peter Lamarque “The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy”: 329.

⁹ J. L. L. Austin (1962) *How To Do Things With Words*: 34.

concept too far in order to fit the situation of poetry, nor distort poetic affirmation to match Austin's idea of the performative. But if Roland Barthes was correct in likening the act of writing to a performative – though he clearly dropped a clanger on the critical community albeit with serious intentions – we might also be correct in likening the *reading* of a poem to a performative. Whether we can identify poetic affirmation with any one of Austin's speech-act categories – “locutionary acts” *saying* something,¹⁰ “illocutionary acts” *in* saying something,¹¹ “perlocutionary acts” *by* saying something¹² – is doubtful because none of these three acts will be exempt, although perlocutionary acts seem to specify intent on the part of the speaker in causing certain effects in the listener, such as specific emotion, in a way that is inimical to poetry. But the acceptance of poetic affirmation by a reader does in some way re-enact something arising in a poet's act of writing. It is what it *says*; it *calls up* what calls it up. And in *acceptance* of our reading, we perform that oath which plunges through all interpretations, reaching to the very ground within which a sense of being a being is made manifest, declaring along with Martin Luther: “Here I stand!”

Poetic affirmation calls me forth as a being into presence in order to fulfil its affirmation. Fulfil what? Affirm what? Affirm *that which declares itself indubitably real*, calling me forth to witness and to affirm. I am brought inexorably to recognize a form of engagement that mutually affirms me in my own sense of being. We find in the poetic moment something that radically plumbs the ground of being a being itself – a central pole redefining our participation in the world. Gaston Bachelard claimed: “The poet speaks on the threshold of being.”¹³ The words *point towards* being and exist on the threshold over which only a comprehending being might cross. It is this attitude constituting the very act of writing that enables us to conceive of the poem as a *performative*, yet without agreeing to the complete identification of the poem with Austin's conception. Later in this chapter, I will be considering another conception which draws

¹⁰ J. L. L. Austin (1962) *How To Do Things With Words*: 98.

¹¹ J. L. L. Austin (1962) *How To Do Things With Words*: 99.

¹² J. L. L. Austin (1962) *How To Do Things With Words*: 101-2.

¹³ Gaston Bachelard (1969) *The Poetics of Space*: xii.

an even closer comparison with the situation of poetic affirmation. That idea, *bearing witness in testimony*, also emphasizes the intrinsic presence of the *I* in the personal speaking voice. Both a performative and bearing-witness are made as oaths that assert their own truth and reality, and this is certainly an aspect which poetic affirmation shares as a speech act.

Imagination, imagery and the imaginary

Rather than as an affirmatory act by which the reader participates with the poem in relation to its core mystery, the vast majority of critical writing on poetry focuses upon a single mode of perception and its cognates, serving to interrupt the possibility for poetic affirmation. For example, the shortfall in Gaston Bachelard's basic unit of the *poetic image* is not in the great phenomenologist's profound insight into the nature of poetic imagery as such, but rather in his central presumption of its reifying visual ontology. I have deliberately refrained from appealing to certain visual qualities that comprise the specific ontological dimensions of a "poetic image" that Bachelard uses for his fundamental unit of poetic discourse. Overly bound to "visual" reification, "poetic image" obscures all other contributive dimensions. I certainly don't mean to imply visual imagery won't be present in a poem or in its reading but in this section I wish to highlight how the assertional tendencies of image and the imagination undermine the reality of poetic affirmation. Even in those examples of what became known as "concrete poetry" – poems set out in a particular shape on the page – the visual reification of the shape acts to *reinforce* what is affirmed in the poem and is secondary. I have in mind two poems by George Herbert (1593-1633): "The Altar," set out in the shape of a pedestal altar, and "Easter Wings," in the shape of two pairs of angel wings, poems which anticipate the concrete poetry movement by some three centuries.¹⁴ By questioning the presumption of the *reifying* visual perception, that interrupts our reading of a poem, we will gain a greater sense of what pertains to poetic affirmation proper.

¹⁴George Herbert (1961) *The poems of George Herbert*: 61 & 80-1.

The life of the *imagination* has been a predominant concern of scholarship in the arts until relatively recently. With it came intrinsic assumptions that distort its conclusions in quite dramatic ways, disrupting poetic affirmation with reifying discourses of concrete categories. Overly visual imagery tends to *solidify* poetic meaning, leaving us stranded at the threshold to mystery and the meaningful. Our affirmation of the poem marks the existential participation in that which is meaningful and does not pause on this threshold. Identifying the visual imagery in the “ways of the imagination” does not promote anything more than a web built from concrete atoms of meaning. By briefly exploring studies that use reifying visual imagery to describe certain poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, we can better appreciate the distance between such reification and poetic affirmation.

John Livingston Lowes is a founding father of the school for studying the “ways of the imagination” in poetry.¹⁵ His critical metaphor of the “imagination” as delineated sight is rarely questioned as a convenient coverall term for human creativity and our ability to form mental images of things. The relation between “vision” and “visionary,” says Jacob Bronowski, finds its obvious analogue in the relation of “image” with “imagination”.¹⁶ Curiously, we rarely place “imagination” alongside “imaginary”, yet it is far from certain that “imagination” will ever avoid a suspicion of “imaginary”. Certainly, there occurs no convenient or well-defined border between them. The unconnected *simulacra* favoured by postmodernist Jean Baudrillard¹⁷ originate in the confusion of the imagination with the imaginary. Nor does Lowes himself avoid this trap.¹⁸ Indeed, he relishes it for it gives him licence to trail after every literary clue, every literary crumb, in a vain attempt to track down the *source* of every image employed by Coleridge. While Lowes’s magnum opus *The Road to Xanadu* takes us for a wonderful romp through Coleridge’s world – his reading and experiences, his friends, mentors and social milieu, his landscape, towns and villages – we are really none-the-wiser about meaning or the

¹⁵ John Livingston Lowes (1930c) *The Road to Xanadu*: 3.

¹⁶ Jacob Bronowski (1978b) *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination*: 18.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard. (1983) *Simulations*.

¹⁸ John Livingston Lowes (1930c) *The Road to Xanadu*: 426.

meaningful in the *Ancient Mariner* (in all its versions) or *Kubla Khan* except in an oblique way. Ignored, for example, is the curve of suffering that gives the *Rime* its existential truth. Ignored too is the subversion of the potentate's power in *Kubla Khan* – not dissimilar to Shelley's short poem *Ozymandius* – reflecting Coleridge's strong socio-political sensibility once given expression in the "pantisocracy" he invented as a young man with his friend Robert Southey. Transported into ecstasies of delight by visions of the Khan's "stately pleasure dome", Lowes failed to heed the "ancestral voices prophesying war" undermining the despot's power. And ignored too was *Kubla Khan*'s river plunging "through caverns measureless to man" down to a "sunless sea," that binds this "dream poem" into a single whole. Neither does he heed the maid with her dulcimer, whose creative power far outstrips the potentate's, for she can conjure up the potentate's palace long after it has turned to dust or wild and also secret abysms quite beyond the potentate's authority, whenever she chooses. Indeed, *Kubla Khan* is a wonderful journey through poetry's vocational power to *call forth*.

Kubla Khan (including its celebrated preface) remains the single-most influential work on creativity in the English language. Certainly its impact can still be felt. Unfortunately, it has been somewhat a poisoned chalice to the "ways of the imagination" by solidifying "images" in the "imagination" into visual structures bound with "hoops of iron," as Lowes so eloquently explains. But if we reconsider what Coleridge actually wrote in the poem rather than prostrating ourselves before the graven image of the opium dream in Coleridge-folklore, we discover that *Kubla Khan* did "a stately pleasure dome *decree*." And the conjuring power of the damsel with the dulcimer is given to us in *song*, by word and melody, not in concrete visual images. That suggests we are in the presence of something much more subtle than the bombastic images of Lowes and his followers. What is given voice here is poetic affirmation plumbing the depths of being itself, rather like the River Alph descending to the very bowels of the earth. The affirmation spoken by the poet or the lady with the dulcimer far outstrips the despot's *decrees*.

The Enchanted Forest by Werner W. Beyer, a follower of Lowes, offers a cautionary tale on the study of simulacra sources as a comprehensive and definitive discipline. In a letter to

Beyer,¹⁹ Lowes wrote that upon a casual reading of Christoph Martin Wieland's eighteenth-century romance *Oberon*: "All at once, to my astonishment, *Kubla Khan* began to appear!" and proposed that Beyer do for "Kubla Khan" what he had done for "The Ancient Mariner" and offered to send Beyer his evidence.²⁰ But *Kubla Khan* is not so easily read as either Lowes or Beyer was disposed to believe. To give but one example, Beyer *identifies* the *woman wailing for her demon-lover* in "Kubla Khan" as *Tatiana*, the rejected consort of the daemon king Oberon, who, in Wieland's romance, lies awake in her fairy cave crying out to be reunited with her lost lover. On the surface, this identification appears to be quite convincing. However, should we return to the words Coleridge *actually* used in *Kubla Khan*, their subtle inferences belie this identification:

But oh! that deep chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

These lines do not, as assumed by Beyer, refer to a specific woman wailing for her [specific] demon-lover at all but rather to the sublime numina of this "savage place" and its enchantment "as e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted/ by woman wailing...", etc. The indications of this allusion are indeed subtle and should not be confused with a *specific, identifiable person*. Instead, Coleridge uses a simile (introduced by "as e'er"), comparing the "savage place" with the illicit and wild, subversive enchantment of "woman", as opposed to the purity of the damsel, an Abyssinian maid, symbolizing chastity. Coleridge is justifying the [wild] sublime nature of the deep chasm with the passionate and, for a male, uncontrollable sexuality of "woman" on the margins of civilized decorum, in opposition to discourses of [male] artifice (e.g. Kubla's decreed "pleasure dome"). "Woman wailing" (a wild word) for the demonic, lies beyond the bounds of human artifice and emperors' decrees: irrepressible and illicit sexual *wailing*

¹⁹ John Livingston Lowes Letter to Werner Beyer, 4 Dec. 1939: q. Werner Beyer (1963) *The Enchanted Forest*: vii.

²⁰ Werner Beyer (1963) *The Enchanted Forest*: 120n.

beyond all masculine control. The sublime, indifferent landscape and the “ancestral voices prophesying war” – voices from within Kubla’s own symbolic underpinning – render void all the potentate’s decrees, magnificent in their majesty of imagination and praxis, thus revealing the bankruptcy of all absolute bureaucratic despotism.²¹ These are powerful tropes indeed. Lowes’s and Beyer’s zeal to identify them with reified images from Wieland’s *Oberon* betrayed the possibility to poetic affirmation. Excessively wedded to the over-riding discourses of reified imagery enshrined by Lowes’s methodology and conclusions, Beyer also reduced the poetic text to a fragmented collection of external references, fragments sourced externally thus deflecting meaning away from the poem to other texts constructed of deflected identities. With that deflection, poetic affirmation is negated by the concrete presence of the imagery. “Woman wailing for her demon-lover” is an allusion *echoing* Wieland’s *Oberon*. George Steiner states: “There can be no doubt that echo enriches, that it is more than a shadow and inert simulacrum.”²² There can be no question of a tangible correlation in this allusion. But in this case, we recognize the allusion as an enriching “echo” neither granting it concrete identity in Coleridge’s poem nor regarding it as formative and originary as the differences far outweigh the similarities. Allusion is not an *origin* or synthesis of concrete atoms of meaning but indicates an underlying presence that reverberates throughout poetic affirmation without controlling the poem. And what is affirmed is not Wieland’s Tatiana grieving for her lost lover, Oberon, but a *sense of the sublime* from the inhuman forces that overwhelm the despot’s artifice.

Poetic affirmation does not reside in gathering reified images into a poetic structure but in the words that stand within a moment of participation in the sense of being disclosed. The “ways of the imagination” school forgot to acknowledge the integrity of the words to call forth the sense of being in which we are able to participate, for the poem is a poet’s affirmation and the reader’s too. By reifying the image, these researchers removed themselves from the possibility

²¹Werner Beyer (1963) *The Enchanted Forest*: 141.

²²George Steiner (1992a) *After Babel*: 317.

for making that important affirmation and thereby lost all relation not only with the sense of being called forth in the poem but also with the poet himself.

The loss of the poet is well illustrated by the treatment of Coleridge by *The Road to Xanadu*. Lowes's magnum opus replaced the poet's living voice with an image of a fictional *genius*, precisely the *straw man* figure Roland Barthes challenged in his iconoclastic prank. *The Road to Xanadu* concludes with Coleridge's "genius" as the product of subliminal forces common to us all but "superlatively enhanced" in him.²³ When Lowes finally conceded that his volume was really about Coleridge after all, contrary to his opening disclaimer – the study of the faculty of the imagination as *distinct* from the man – he gave us the divinely inspired somnambulist rather than the real Coleridge living in place and period. In short, Lowes and his fellow source-gatherers were governed by discourses of genius within which the poet and the poem has only incidental appeal. But then this "genius" still remained a wounded divinity, the grounded angel: "an eager and divinely gifted spirit with piteously trailing wings."²⁴ No mere mortal in her or his finitude can aspire to the divine plane of infinite creation.

Instead of describing the poems of Coleridge according to their conventional, contextual and revolutionary dimensions, as he would have from the stance of an earlier work *Convention and Revolt in Poetry* (1919), instead of pursuing the program of the *Lyrical Ballads* developed by Coleridge and Wordsworth together, and understanding the poems in the light of the community during the poet's time at Nether Stowey, instead of a definitive account of poetic creation in its very real ontological contexts, John Livingston Lowes opted for a series of fables. More than this, he failed to take into account the act of writing itself, when a poet's voice emerges to make an affirmation. In the act of speaking, the threshold between the spoken and the unspoken is breached. But Lowes lingered in the belief that, given his silent assumption of the primacy of the reified image, the act of writing was secondary to these "ways of the imagination." Yet, ironically, Lowes's primary data was the *written word* and *speech* rather than

²³John Livingston Lowes (1930c) *The Road to Xanadu*: 431.

²⁴John Livingston Lowes (1930c) *The Road to Xanadu*: 434.

visual imagery. Throughout *The Road to Xanadu*, the constant reiteration of unsubstantiated “facts” amid a welter of reified images seemed to mirror Lowes’s own experience in recognizing resemblances, where the text has been cast as a cluster of similes. Consequently, the mystery in the poetry was methodologically “completed” by Lowes’s own sense of being [as a literary detective] according to his experience and presumptions of genius, Coleridge and his poetry forever deferred. Lowes expunged the poet from consideration as assuredly as any post-Barthesian postmodernist.

That does not mean we cannot use the analogy of “imagination” to bring a certain visceral complexion – a sense an embodiment in the world – to that rather colourless term “creativity,” a much beloved synonym of twentieth-century psychology for *problem solving*. However, we must always be vigilant against the presumptions in the word “imagination” that can separate and solidify visual thought into reified things, turning them to atomistic simulacra that require “synthesizing” [into molecules of meaning] to create poems and paintings, scientific theories, building designs and sculpture. Poets, like their readers, relate to the world through their speech. They do not juggle bits and pieces of imagery like that given concrete form in Poincaré’s celebrated portrait of mental atoms with hooks-and-eyes arbitrarily jostling, combining and recombining into new and novel associations.²⁵ On this point, one must agree with Sartre: The error arises, he says, in ascribing to a mental image the attributes of the perceived object, as if the perceived object imparted to the perception, and by implication to the mental image, those attributes that pertain to it as an *object* within the reifying action of our objective perception.²⁶

However, a vocation calls for a sense of being to speak and *affirm* it, involving the whole person to be present, for only then can a true sense of being be forthcoming. “The primary word [*Thou*],” wrote Martin Buber, “can only be spoken with the whole being.”²⁷ There might indeed be a detachment of poem from the world but that very detachment *does not negate the world*, as

²⁵ Henri Poincaré (1958) *Science and Method*: 52-3.

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre *The Psychology of Perception*: 1-15.

²⁷ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 10.

we shall realize in the chapter on relation. Nor does it create a simulacrum forever distanced from the world. On the contrary, such detachment allows us to frame the poem as a poem, a separate lingual *ingathering* that turns to *face the world* in its own right as a work of art in order to affirm the sense of being the being towards which it points.

Testimony and its guarantor

I have paraphrased Gabriel Marcel in claiming a poem is *an affirmation which I am*. It is an *act of being* to open the poem to its most fundamental possibilities. The act of reading a poem cannot, therefore, be passive. Nor should the reader expect to treat the poem as a mere cipher to be absorbed without effort. Because critical discourse necessarily serves to limit ambiguity, its meanings are posited *within* the text specifically as a *content*. This confers a certain passivity upon its readers, because the text is the primary agent performing the hermeneutic task of bringing signification to (almost) univocal clarity. That does not entail a text will automatically be *easy* to read with no effort required of its readers. Any reader of Hegel's extraordinary philosophy would recognize that critical discourse does not automatically provide simplicity. But the responsibility for comprehension lies with the text and its writer rather than with the reader. Critical writing will be judged most successful when its assertions are clearly asserted with little exertion required of its readers.

A poem, on the other hand, has a radically different role to play because the reader cannot be passive before it. Its divergent hermeneutic circle by itself ensures this. But when its readers are required to step up to the poem with their *sense of being a being* in order to grasp its mystery, then the poem takes us beyond all interpretation and into the arena of truth affirming itself. *I-affirm* is the kind of ontological act which can only be said with the whole being, from whence the sense of being a being is at its most potent and full. *I-affirm* is at ground a profoundly *personal* act in which I give over the whole of myself, withholding nothing, in an act of my being as *a being* in my exclusivity.²⁸ Universalising Being, subsequently denying the exclusivity

²⁸ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 10.

of particular beings, diverts attention from poetic affirmation. Poetry is always relative to *personal being*, which is neither universal nor absolute.

What is the status of the poet's voice then if the reader enacts the affirmation of the work? And what is the status of the poet should we identify the poem with her or his poetic voice? Gabriel Marcel can provide valuable insight on these questions through the distinction he draws between "observing" and "witnessing." The following description of this essential distinction draws upon Marcel but remains primarily my own.

The scientist observes experimental data, the observer's observations reflecting the warp and weft of the scientific endeavour. It might be that these observations grow out of a very deep fascination with the material at hand, yet observation neither owes anything to the observer's person nor does it touch upon the observer's person. Anybody else can replace the observer in making this observation and, with an equivalence of skill, be able to make the same observation. The "I" who observes is highly impersonal.²⁹

Each observation is totally exhausted by its immediacy. Once the observation is made, it carries no lasting effect upon the next moment, when another observation replaces it. The observation contains no temporal perdurance beyond its moment without attachment except to jostle with other observations, each a momentary expression without further weight than it itself alone in that moment and only for that moment. No sense of attachment will endure even to its moment since the experiment can be repeated and another observation of equal status made. Exhausting its immediacy removes the observation from the binding frame of existential time even for its observer. Observation in this way can only be *technical*, a product of the mechanics of science in the mechanism of experiment. The language chosen to express this limited technological relation is also impersonal: "It is stated..." or "One observes..." Legitimate and proper to critical discourse, certainly, but the "It is..." and the "One observes..." and their critical cognates, barely register any significant degree of personal commitment. That is so even

²⁹ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "Testimony and Existentialism": 92.

when the observation happens to be something that is experienced only by a *subjective*: I observe “I have a headache”; “I feel dizzy”; “my clothes are tight and uncomfortable”, and so on.

Anybody might be speaking and anybody else listening. A sense of *being a being* has no involvement in this particular transaction. The *subjective* realm, like the *objective* realm, is as limited to the anonymity of observation as any specifically scientific observation, a point that is manifestly true of all medical science. The *personal sphere* of poetry is neither co-extensive nor synonymous with *subjectivity* or *subjective experience*.

How different testimony is from observation, said Gabriel Marcel. It is not just anyone who bears such witness. It is always and inevitably *I*, always *this* particular person with her or his integrity intact. In its most identifiable form, we recognize the testimony typical of a court of law, of the statutory declaration and the legal document, none of which can be spoken by any other. But the type of testimony which I wish to draw a comparison with poetry is bearing the identity of her or him “who is not exhausted by immediacy,”³⁰ for we begin by understanding that poetic testimony is the poet *bearing witness* – that each poem is the *testimony of its poet*. Where up to now we concentrated upon the reader’s relation with the poem with only a marginal place for the poet, with *affirmation as testimony* we find ourselves face to face with the poet’s speaking voice as we did with respect to the poem as performative. I can take up the poet’s affirmation *as if* it were my own, realizing as I do so that I am entering into relation with the poet and speaking with her or his voice, but this affirmation I make will always be of *the poet’s* testimony. I, the reader, bear witness to the poet’s bearing witness in testimony, yet that bearing witness, my bearing witness, takes the form of an affirmation in deep relation with the poet’s affirmation.

The poet acts as my guarantor. This differs markedly from a scientist’s observations, which are guaranteed only through an external authority. The *bona fides* of the observation are established from the outside: the scientist comes from *this* laboratory in *that* university and holds

³⁰ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “Testimony and Existentialism”: 92.

these qualifications and his or her assertions are made in an article *published* by an authoritative, peer-reviewed journal. Contrary to this external rationale of scientific authority, the poet *personally* provides the guarantee for the poem. No other person wrote this poem. Even should the poet remain anonymous, still the person of the poet acts as guarantor. Indeed, it is perhaps more important that we do not acquaint ourselves with the biographical details of a poet's life because that might lead us to cast the poetry into just so many observations to merely illuminate that biography. No, the guarantee arises in the authenticity of the poetry *qua* poetry as it reflects the personal voice of the poet, not as the primary data for a biographical reconstruction. This latter confuses the person of the poet with her or his observable life. The poetic affirmation that bears witness has been guaranteed by the person of the poet and the poet's authentic speaking voice that occurs in the moment of speaking but is not exhausted by that moment. The guarantee provided by the poet, then, is a guarantee not based on the ideological or epistemological truth of its assertion but upon the poet's commitment to this affirmation:

Every testimony is based on a commitment and to be incapable of committing oneself is to be incapable of bearing witness.³¹

Neither should we identify the testimony of the poem with a social act. "Society" is a highly ambiguous term often taken to be synonymous with the conventional discourses informing our everyday situations. Marcel maintains that testimony is made *to transcendence itself*, in which society and its institutions need have no involvement.³² The transcendence of the witness's testimony in a court of law cannot be identified with the jury sitting across the courtroom from her or himself. The witness testifies before her or his *conscience*, before *Truth*, before *Justice*, perhaps all three, but not before the mechanisms of the so-called "justice system" or its conventions. Rather, the true witness testifies to the mysteries of Justice from which no-one can be pardoned. In this regard, the testimony of the poem is to that essential affirmation from the "centre of fierce art"³³ of personhood – this is the transcendence to which it appeals. Marcel

³¹ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "Testimony and Existentialism": 93.

³² Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "Testimony and Existentialism": 94.

³³ Francis Webb "Melville at Wood's Hole" *in* Webb, Francis (2011) *Collected poems*: 52.

underlies this profound sense of being a being given expression by witnessing: “[We] are witnesses and [...] this is the expression of our mode of belonging to the world?”³⁴

Because witnessing forms the primary mode of our belonging to the world, we are able to claim that *poetry is itself a primary mode of belonging to the world* in contra-distinction to objective observations and their critical assertions which are secondary. Until we look upon the face of poetry as relation, this mode of belonging to the world will not become entirely clear. Yet having said that witnessing is the primary mode of belonging, it is not at all obvious *what* it is we witness. Marcel wrote:

I freely admit the danger that this suggestion, so far from throwing light on our problems, may thicken the shadows. Witnesses to what and before whom? We have said “before a transcendence,” but so far from being able to discern its visage, we could not even say if it was anyone at all.³⁵

The problem becomes particularly fraught when we consider witnessing in an objectified manner to accomplish the act of overtaking and confining the chaotic life in which we exist. Poetry opens up a way to being a being in relation with the world in such a way that it is made available to its readers through this poet’s testimony. But while we might reify the poem into a thing, a work of art, an object, yet it is not its objective status that renders it befitting a poet’s testimony. On the contrary, the poem is testimony only when it bears the hallmarks of the poet’s witnessing by which we, its readers, might in our turn bear witness. If it were always an object, there would be no need for us to bear witness to it. An object is complete in itself as a thing amongst other things. It is its own presence, against which all witnessing is superfluous. To overcome the dangers created by the reification of testimony, Marcel identifies *fidelity* as characteristic of witnessing:

Let us look at it in this way: it has happened to all of us to say of some consecrated and devoted life that such an existence is a testimony. Now, clearly, the value of such testimony is bound up with some form of fidelity which has

³⁴ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “Testimony and Existentialism”: 96-7.

³⁵ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “Testimony and Existentialism”: 97.

become embodied in such life: it may be the fidelity of a child to its parents, of a servant to his master, or it may be fidelity to a cause served until the end. The notion of fidelity can be degraded into passivity, into the expression of a kind of brutish habit; clearly this has no value. The value lies in the faithful following, through darkness, of a light by which we have been guided and which is no longer visible to us directly; indeed, it can be said that it is because there is darkness, an eclipse, that there can be testimony—attestation.³⁶

Testimony, therefore, is fundamentally based upon *fidelity* to a “light,” grace or a gift received that is, for the present moment, *in eclipse*. “Yet,” as Martin Buber asked in a not so very different context, “what is actually so much present as it is?”³⁷ The poet faithfully brings the poem forth to bear witness; that the poem is in a certain way the bearing of witness. And the poet is her or him to whom we owe our faith as the reader of this poem. In both writing and reading the poem, the issue of fidelity arises paramount. “If I myself have taken part in an event,” wrote Marcel, “I can only certify, I cannot bear witness.” The caveat to this statement of Marcel’s is that bearing-witness might very well be the event in which we take part. But, although bearing witness is a very special event, we are able to recognize in it that necessary *detachment* by which the poet can bear witness to the mystery of being that is the inscription of the poem. The poet writes the poem to bear witness – the act of writing is that act of bearing witness. Therein lies her or his fidelity to the vision that is the poem. Martin Buber meant roughly the same thing in his philosophical prose-poem *I and Thou*:

This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises.³⁸

³⁶ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “Testimony and Existentialism”: 97-8.

³⁷ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 10.

³⁸ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 9-10.

The form that asks of the poet to be made into a work, the act of creative *vocation*, is that of which the poet bears witness. And we grasp that the reader's fidelity is the act of the whole being in faith to the poet's vocation. Withholding part divides and destroys faith itself though faith itself exists in the *Is-not* of doubt. Fidelity lies in a presencing of grace, of giving, of making present in its presence and making a gift to present. Thereupon, the reception in reading is an act of receiving that grace, which can only be accepted with the whole being. Bearing witness, the creative vocation of the poet, is received in faith by the receptive reader, who witnesses in her or his turn that vocation. There will be more to be said about faith and creative vocation in the theory chapter devoted to relation. It should be noted that, although Buber's terminology is heavily steeped in his philosophy of the interhuman dialogical principle, his views are startlingly close to those of Gabriel Marcel. That too will become clearer as we proceed.

In writing the poem, the poet grants us the opportunity to receive this gift, a gift which we receive by our own bearing of witness – not passively, for who could read a poem passively and say they have received it at all? – the bearing of witness by the poem's reader is very much to make an affirmation. "To give is to give to someone," wrote Marcel.³⁹ I do not wish to follow on the path of Wolfgang Iser's concept of the "implied reader",⁴⁰ because his structuralism forges the reader into a *type* who can only appreciate the work in its set-down meanings, thus negating the hermeneutic incompleteness which sets the reader free to decide. But there is certainly a sense in which the offering of the gift, its "grace" as we have mentioned, is presented for another ear and eye that will hear and see, and ready to receive it, towards the person able to step forward and accept the gift. That is not the same thing as an 'implied reader'. Martin Buber wrote on "the word that is spoken" this thought that captures much of what we have talked about in this section:

Man—he alone—speaks, for only he can address the other just as the other being standing at a distance over against him: but in addressing it, he enters into

³⁹ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "Testimony and Existentialism": 99.

⁴⁰ Wolfgang Iser (1974) *The Implied Reader*.

relationship. The coming-to-be of language also means a new function of distance. For even the earliest speaking does not, like a cry or signal, have its end in itself; it sets the word outside itself in being, and the word continues, it has continuance. And this continuance wins its life ever anew in true relation, in the spokenness of the word. Genuine dialogue witnesses to it, and poetry witnesses to it. For the poem is spokenness, spokenness to the Thou, wherever this partner might be.⁴¹

And to what do we bear witness than the *affirmation* that is the poem, guaranteed by the *person* of the poet, always in presence through the speaking voice of the poet in eclipse. The guarantee that the poem bears its witness has been granted through our fidelity to the eclipsed poet that we will read the work aright. We do justice to the poet's fidelity in bearing witness by attending to the poem with our whole being, just as the poet also attended with her or his whole being. That is, the poet's affirmation clears the way for us to make this affirmation in turn.

The eclipsed guarantor

The eclipse of the person of the poet by the concrete presence of the poem before us is an event in the life of the poem. Yet this does not imply the person of the poet has been negated, as many postmodernists might want to believe. Even in death, the person of the poet remains *eclipsed* but *still present* in the voice of the poem. The poet continues to be the guarantor of the poem. She or he acts as the guarantor for our affirmation, enabling our affirmation to be more than merely assuming the poem as an assertion. All affirmation requires a guarantor.

When the poem is taken for the affirmation it truly is, it is an affirmation that was made by the poet who made it available for us and, therefore, the personal dimension serves to allow us the opportunity of making this, the poet's affirmation. Poetic affirmation remains the preserve of the poet, though she or he may be dead or about whom we know next to nothing: But not in the simple way of being identical with the being of the poem. No, the poet's voice speaks to us through the poem. Yet it remains true that the poem is guaranteed its affirmational authority by the eclipsed person of the poet. That is why the poems of the fabricated "Ern Malley" are so

⁴¹ Martin Buber (1965b) "The Word that is Spoken." in *The Knowledge of Man*: 117-18.

entirely problematical. The being of the poet in this case was a fiction and, therefore, the poems had no guarantor as such. A hoax like this does not shine with the authority of poetry.

Recognized a fraud, the poems merely disappoint. We regard them as barely “poems” at all, just concoctions or pastiches of second-hand sentences, cobbled together to resemble poems of a particular style. This is why poetic affirmation as testimony carries such a crucial expectation of fidelity. That guarantee might be given in a single poem. But given it must be or the poems will not succeed as poems. Fail to receive that guarantee and once again, for each of us who fail to receive it, the poems fail.

This conclusion contradicts the prevalent postmodernist ideology that altogether negates a supposed ‘authority figure’ in order to purportedly valorise the text. By recognising the eclipsed poet, we are not negating the text in favour of the poet. Rather, the poet stands guarantor for the voice of the poem. In that way the affirmation, bringing the text into actuality as a voice, can stand before us, solid in its foundation, not slipping away into the chimera of “simulations”⁴² to which postmodernism might condemn it in the intersection of competing simulacra. And what is that foundation but the mystery of a sense of being a being brought into the poem by the poet and to which we, as its readers, respond by recreating that sense of being through the mystery of our own sense of being a being. In the “Ern Malley” poems, how can we recreate a sense of being a being if there was no such sense to begin with? All else is delusion. That is the central reason we require the eclipsed poet as guarantor: To grant to the words the gravity by which we can independently reach the mystery unfolding from them. The mainspring of the hoax was not in the bankruptcy of modernism, as was claimed by the anti-modernist poets who concocted “Ern Malley”, but in convincing the *Angry Penguins* editors that a guarantor for the poems existed. There is no doubt the illusion was made palpable by the beautifully-crafted artefacts. Because the two hoaxers were, indeed, poets, they constructed the texts with a highly refined eye that only highly experienced poets could have achieved. That still does not make the

⁴² Jean Baudrillard. (1983) *Simulations*.

poems “poetry” as such, even though they appear to fulfil all the technical requirements of poetry. However, it might be argued the texts do indeed represent poetry after all, if only because the two poets who crafted them inadvertently imparted the guarantee they so ardently wished to negate. This is a debate that must be tackled on its own merits.

However, all conversion of poetry into biography is fundamentally flawed. My emphasis in this section is not to justify poetry with biography but to identify the eclipsed poet as the guarantor of the poem. We are certainly within reach of the intimate voice of the poet and that enables us to create a dialogue with a poet’s sense of being a being. What kind of epistemology grants us a *knowing* beyond the necessity of objective, critical knowledge? Sometimes biographic details open a poem to greater understanding but it does not, nor can it ever, *explain* the poem. Nor does the poem *explain* the life of the poet. Poetic truth uncovers a different set of epistemological conditions from the analysans of objective knowledge. But no less valid for all that.

We have described poetic affirmation in terms of the ever-recurring words that penetrate the interpretations such that it forms a pole around which all interpretation orbits. We have also recorded the likeness of this affirmation to Austin’s conception of the performative and also revealed many similarities to Marcel’s study of testimony and bearing witness. These have turned our attention back to the poet whose poetry is her or his affirmation. Yet they do not exclude the reader from affirming, performing, or bearing witness to the poetic affirmation as she or he enters into dialogue with the poem. The most surprising aspect has been the recovery of the *eclipsed poet* as guarantor for our own poetic affirmation. “Eclipsed” in this case stands for the particular way in which the poet is present in providing a guarantee for a sense of being a being which is not bound by or to the biographical details of the poet’s life. Furthermore, the kind of knowledge we gain from the poem is not biographical – though it arises from the poet’s life – but rather *ontological*, achieving values that cannot be fully comprehended by observational and assertional science and other critical discourses without an appeal to aspects of being to which science has no formal access or ability to recognize.

If we pass on to Francis Webb's poetic cycle, "Eyre All Alone," it is because the affirmations we discover therein, affirmations that we are able to partake, face existence directly amid the explorer's search for transcendence, interestingly not by the necessity of a grand finale from the fictional hero's quest but ultimately inside every ordinary, concrete moment. Our own journey through understanding poetry leads us assuredly through each recognized point – incompleteness, mystery, enrichment and now affirmation in poetry – that portrays a stage in which being and existence can become to be known. In each poem we have considered so far, the figure of Francis Webb stands present yet eclipsed, his person the guarantor by which each poem stands validated before us as poetry: valued, valuable and valorised. He has borne witness to the meaning of existence. Though his suffering would eventually take him from us, still his work proves that during the writing of his poetry, he successfully achieved redemption from the domination of his desolation.

Case Study Chapter IV

Eyre All Alone

The third of Francis Webb's explorer cycles, following *A Drum for Ben Boyd* and *Leichhardt in Theatre*, *Eyre All Alone* commences in a state of existential desolation similar to the unredeemed states of the characters in "The Canticle". Here, however, desolation is located in a place and society that is recognizably Australian. The dislocated settler, living in perpetual fear of his geographical isolation, provides the initial metaphor for the oppressive alienation that separates him both physically and mentally from his community.¹ Spirituality for Webb is always connected to poetic, and therefore, meaningful, location in community and place. The alienation of the settler reflects common experience of the anonymous expanse of suburban Australia. But one might also argue that this alienation also emerges from increasing institutionalization in society reflecting a somewhat Kafkaesque world rather familiar to those incarcerated in mental asylums, as was Webb. The explorer's journey in the poem through time and space carries the reader from the burden of existential desolation to an affirmation of the eternal within every concrete moment. It is necessary to realize how much the affirmation the reader is called upon to make at the outset of the poem-cycle is an affirmation of the negative: An affirmation of alienation as despair and as anxiety. By making this affirmation in turn, the reader is able to commence the personal and spiritual journey along with Eyre and the poet, as if she or he were a pilgrim too.

How much does each moment in Eyre's voyage of exploration merely result in marking yet another milestone in the colonial agenda to usurp the land? Under the steady encroachment of imperial domination, each successive layer of desolation chronicles the advance of institutional hegemony, growing ever stronger, each layer as desolate as the last. Yet even within this hegemonic structure there still remains potential for spiritual fulfilment. The wonder of everyday reality that gave the simple human gesture of Francis its spiritual power to transform lives, in "The Canticle," is here reaffirmed in a very Australian context. However, the portrayed

¹W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 147.

transformation of each character in “The Canticle” occurred as a consequence of existential enrichment from an encounter with the poet-saint. In “Eyre All Alone”, this potential for transformation is accomplished within the immediacy of the reader’s own affirmations and is thus more subtle. While this is also profoundly enriching, nevertheless its dynamic is achieved far more in the space between reader and poem.

Each moment realizing spiritual possibility reflects the personal realm outlined by theistic Existentialism. One might recognize this in Webb’s response to the atheism then dominating the Australian literary elite, particularly that of the Norman Lindsay set, probably in the wake of Sartre and Camus, as the modern inheritors of Nietzsche, who regarded the moment as bearing the potential for gaining authentic freedom, dominated in Sartre’s view by the eschewing of Bad Faith. Webb remains closest to the theistic Existentialists – e.g., Marcel, Tillich, Buber, Bultmann and Jaspers – who followed upon Kierkegaard in granting God a central place in human existence.

Metaphors of desolation

Typical of Webb’s major poetic cycles, the cycle is introduced by a voice that is far from heroic. The lacuna that has marked so many of his large works, receives its restatement here as both a state of existential alienation, the missing centre of the explorer as a person, on the one hand, and the absent spiritual centre of God. Yet it also represents its swansong, for we will be ushered into the reflective voice of the explorer himself with a reassurance that can barely contain our surprise. Perhaps Eyre’s journal motivated the poet to find the personal voice of an explorer for the first time. As always, Webb’s heroes have feet of clay but the explorer remains, nevertheless, the pilgrim’s bridge towards the mysterious spiritual heartland.

The questions being asked by the settler in the first poem do not relieve him of his social and spiritual alienation. If there is any heroism, it is the heroism of ordinary people who grasp what is already there before them. The wretched desolation is as much a product of the settler’s ignorance as the external imposition of factual reality. Beginning with its description in terms of the external physical world, the South Australian settler bemoans his social and geographical

isolation on these farthest margins of the British Empire. The geography of nostalgia leaves the settler, like all his fellows, bereft of the comforting landscape of England, at once so familiar yet so distant. The present landscape, into which he has been exiled, is seen as the utter antithesis of his homeland, a negation of all meaning and all that is meaningful.

Our little township is a lesion
On the plump hinder parts of nothing. Scratching,
scratching,
The moody nails of the sun. Or say, our stony
Brain and gullet wobble corroboree
With London, tall lady Exeter, Broad Devon,
And other tender ghosts swaying towards the palate.²

His geographic solitude stands for the outer carapace of spiritual alienation every bit as devastating as his physical alienation. He judges his neighbours to be without human dignity, no potential for anything but the continuation of the despair throughout their desolate lives. The settler feels alone, alone amongst a crowd of monstrosities with whom he feels no sense of community, no common bond with his fellow human-beings, barely human at all:

We are isolated. Is man man?
He shrugs among guffaws, transports of old jailbird dayshine
Riotous in the stocks, and drooling.³

In a few lines Webb captures the context of the settler's despair, the desolate world surrounding an alienated man. And yet the vision, towards which they all tender their hopes, lies in the grand ventures of colonial expansion, such as the transcontinental telegraph that will interlink this desolate locality with its colonial centre and supposedly link man to man, hopefully transcending the vastness of the Australian interior emptiness: "Man to man. /Which is sometimes /God to man, under all seven stars, westward."⁴

² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 265.

³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 265.

⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 266.

The references to *Revelation* are, as always, handled deftly with the lightest of touches. Bill Ashcroft identified the “seven stars” with the Southern Cross, clearly the seven stars of the Southern Cross with the two pointer stars. The vision brings its benefaction to this south land. But the amplification of this vast desolation into both the endgame of empire, along with the pilgrim’s journey through the hostile emptiness to redemption, also implies a more radical interpretation: The seven stars of *Revelation*. Life and death proceed together dialectically in a single process. The tension between the apocalyptic pretensions of the dislocated colonial society and the spirit of the land creates a polarisation that will only be resolved when Edward Eyre finally engages with the spirit of the land face to face.

This land appears as both despair and the ascetic’s dark night, the pathway to communion with God. We grasp the sense in which the vast landscape overwhelms the colonial enterprise and stamps its vista of inhuman alienation, but also its overlooked spiritual possibility, onto the hearts of those who confront it. Yet with what hostility does the settler question the need for Eyre’s journey? The vastness of the land lays down an impossible degree of monotony for him such that no moment in the intractable tedium can rise above the plain of ennui and disillusionment to trace out even the remotest outline of a spiritual transcendence. The irony in the Biblical references, this time to *Exodus*, marking the going out from slavery towards the Promised Land, here becomes but the futile ramblings of unmotivated colonial seepage. The free-verse of the first stanzas gives way to a parody in heroic couplets with the dusty taste of irony on its lips, doubly emphasising the mockery of the Biblical allusions. The language is sharp, uncompromising, striking a hard note over a background of tortured rhythms and unhappy rhymes:

Walk, walk. From dubious footfall one
At Fowler’s Bay the chosen must push on
Towards promised fondlings, dancings of the Sound.
Fourth plague, of flies, harries this bloodless ground.
Cliff and salt balance wheel of heathen planet
Tick, twinkle in concert to devise our minute.

But something on foot, and burning, nudges us
Past bitter waters, sands of Exodus.⁵

This stanza will be repeated throughout the poem cycle, each retelling grasping new possibilities for interpretation according to its placement. Such a repetition is reminiscent of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, in which the promenade theme ("Walk, walk") marks the transition from one painting to another. One can easily imagine that each poem represents a "painting" in a symbolic exhibition and the "Walk, walk" stanza comes to be the promenade between the groups of paintings. Each repetition of the promenade theme implies an increase of generative meaning and an increase in the power of the affirmation encouraged by restating the words. Here, the tone of suffering the land without the heroic grandeur of the Biblical story of *Exodus* infuses this stanza with disillusionment even in the face of a bare gleam of something more than just the suffered land: "But something on foot, and burning, nudges us /Past bitter waters, sands of Exodus." Perhaps the journey is not as useless as it first appears. Perhaps some barely-glimpsed spiritual essence might be invoked by our actions? Yet the tone of the stanza in this context does not rise above bitter disillusionment of the alienated settler, completely at odds with his world.

The desolation of the landscape reflects spiritual desolation, in a poem titled "Water", which will also be a thirst for the meaningful, for spirit, for God, as much as it is a thirst for water in a land deprived of water. The picture paints a terrifying portrait of how on-going despair goads us to futile action, robbing us of our ontological underpinnings. Actions across the parched land cannot compensate for the thirst tearing away at our souls.

Prickly ethics of scrub and dwarf tea-tree:
My mind's blank deserted tableland
Has, therefore, root and action.
I think a drab mendicant green against sunburst;
I have conned Being, quake in its hundred degrees;
I moralise upon legless vortices of sand;

⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 266.

I taste the shrewd liquors of refraction:
But thirst is the logician, thirst.⁶

Cut to its bare essence, no word more than necessary to express the desiccated land and its counterpart in the thirsting, desperate person, compulsively undertaking his manic search for the meaningful, all the time missing the truth that spirit can be discovered within every moment. The sense of self-delusion is made concrete by the four hubristic lines beginning with “I”. The “drab mendicant” the explorer believes “green against sunburst” – “sunburst,” a platitude for patriotic pride – remains drab, the sack-cloth of a beggar-monk hardly the green verdant grass sanctified by a divine nimbus of sunlight. He does not regard himself as such a beggar-monk. At the end of his journey, that self-regard will have radically shifted but at the outset he is filled with hubris. The land can speak of the spirit but the explorer needs to see it for what it is, in its drab mendicancy. He feels he has “conned Being” yet the hammer heat of the desert really grips him in its terror, filling him with dread, perhaps also loathing. Eyre’s moralising upon “the legless vortices of sand” means that at heart his basic relations with the world are focused upon nothingness, a void, empty of meaningfulness and purpose. And although he tastes “the shrewd liqueurs of refraction,” he is still mortally wounded by the logic of thirst that stings remorselessly both body and soul with an irresistible mechanism of its own, hardly subject to the aesthete’s attempts to control and outmanoeuvre it. Surely “the shrewd liqueurs of refraction” represent the illusion of a mirage, a bitter substitute for life-giving water. This first stanza of “Water” represents the hubris of the explorer embarking upon his journeys of exploration, carrying with him the counterfeit presumptions that underlie all that the explorer is and does. He is parched and spiritually dead and this very despair serves to enforce his dreadful compulsion to set forth, imposing a false aspiration onto his journey, in the belief that his final objective will bring him a sense of purpose and achievement. Webb crosses this landscape of despair with assurance and conviction. When he turns to the fountainhead of spiritual acceptance, it is with a clear vision that penetrates to the very core of the moment and its meaningful mystery. Then the metaphors

⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 266.

he employs will create a *clearing* for the mystery of spiritual being – the ‘holy being’ of Paul Tillich – itself to be made present and towards which all our interpretations point.

The second stanza of the poem “Water” uses the metaphor of water in a novel way for Webb’s explorer poems, although far from new to Webb. Water, such a potent symbol for the desert traveller, now lies beneath or within the journeying explorer, not in the much desired but fictional inland sea supposedly at journey’s end, would that his awful compulsion allow him to rest long enough to acknowledge this truth. The sense of the spirit lying to hand rather than as a distant finishing-line, towards which we must struggle, is here underscored by the way Webb uses this very ancient metaphor:

Water, essential sweetness beneath my tableland,
Or grace, or heartbeat, or action,
Temper in courteous reason the bluff sunburst;
Have Being, the mercenary one hundred degrees,
Stack its pointless weapons upon moist sand.⁷

This stanza responds point-by-point to the false hubris in the first stanza. The relation with sincere detachment – “Temper in courteous reason” – to the “bluff sunburst,” seeing it for its true reality. Receiving Being, that hammer heat, in humility, yet accept its white-heat barbs, letting them dissipate upon moist sand, no longer empty moralising on “legless vortices of sand,” this sand is moist, filled with water and thus, meaningful with the water of spiritual life. Let real water replace the vain appearance in the mirage and don’t be fooled by this desiccated, deathly apparition, a siren-song of pretence. Water as metaphor for underlying spirit connects, instead, with a sense of holy water, of baptism and the growth of plants and animals for which it is a necessity; water is all of these and more: refreshment for a parched thirst, coolness against the hammer hot sun. But none of these connotations is exhaustive and we return to the words, again and again, as they arise to become a profound affirmation through every plane of discourse. Such waters run deep indeed.

⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 266.

This poem brings Webb's poetic enterprise to its greatest condensation of expression and meaning yet. Stripped of all superfluities and expressive of a desiccation in the landscape's apparent emptiness and living in spiritually emptiness, the explorer strives towards enlightenment through a Herculean labour. But the negative desolation of the first stanza transforms, in the second, into an ascetic simplicity of naked spiritual faith. That this transformation is possible underlies the futility of Eyre's search for fulfilment through exploration.

The desolate solitude

On April 29, tragedy struck the expedition and Eyre found himself "alone" except for his aboriginal servant Wylie. Baxter, his "poor overseer," was found in a pool of blood having been mysteriously shot, presumably by one of the younger aborigines. How Eyre faced his plight is described in his journals. After having been alerted to the event by Wylie, Eyre made haste to where Baxter lay dying. His existential plight could no longer be ignored:

The frightful, the appalling truth now burst upon me, that I was alone in the desert. He who faithfully served me for many years [...] was now no more.... The horrors of my situation glared in on me in such startling reality, as for an instant almost to paralyse the mind.⁸

Yet this solitude, which Webb divined as typical of the existential suffering of mankind, was palpably untrue in very fact for there remained his faithful aboriginal servant, Wylie. That the aborigine should be treated so callously with scant respect for his value as a human being discloses the exclusionist mentality of the colonial mind that rips away all perceived competitors from any possibility for ownership of social validity and land. Therefore, the very identification of Eyre with the existential anguish of the devastated solitary in the face of his desolation by the poet appears at first to be prevarication of the worst order. In the notes to the *Collected Poems* (1969), Webb wrote:

⁸ Edward Eyre q. in W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 149.

My insistence on Eyre's aloneness is not an overlooking of Wylie, but comes from seeing such a journey of discovery as suggestive of another which is common to us all.⁹

Bill Ashcroft could hardly be less convinced by this. He bitterly complains:

The psychological and symbolic isolation of the British explorer is a significant aspect of the poem, but manifestly, Eyre was *not* alone, no rationalisation can overcome the fact that Wylie's non-existence, both on Eyre's journey and in the poem, is deeply indicative of the exclusion of the indigenous inhabitant, and of the fact that the aloneness felt by white culture was a product of its own colonial mentality. Eyre's reaction [...] gives a very clear report upon the attitudes underlying British expansion: the assumption of the inhabitants as either subject races, inferior or non-existent, and of the actual territory of the journey as a natural and ordained extension of the British empire.¹⁰

The very fact of this "aloneness", though Wylie accompanies him and gives him succour, is clearly contrasted with the moment Eyre is truly devoid of companionship yet feels far from alone. These contrasting figures of solitude are central to the poem and were, it seems, forgotten by the poet at the time he wrote his notes to the *Collected Poems*. At the end, after Wylie has been reclaimed by his tribal brothers and sisters, Eyre does indeed find himself utterly alone but no longer "alone" in the spiritual sense. The irony cannot be starker. The point in which Eyre is finally and irrevocably *alone*, he is not really alone at all. It is the second solitude that discloses the ascetic's solitary encounter with God. The first solitude is, on the other hand, essentially existential isolation and alienation in the manner of the South Australian settler. Just as his power and hubris was revealed to be an illusion like the desert mirage, leaving the explorer more in thirst than ever, Eyre's isolation is also illusory. When Eyre eventually addresses Wylie as a person in his exclusivity, the explorer's redemption will have already begun.

Given Bill Ashcroft's primary concern with tracing the arc of *postcolonial discourse* in Webb's poetry, one must presume that he too has a particular interest in challenging these colonial fictions. Yet within the colonial mindset of Eyre himself, the supporting physical

⁹ Francis Webb (1969) *Collected Poems*: 251.

¹⁰W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 149-50.

presence of Wylie does not disprove the thesis of Webb's cycle of poems. The overarching existential predicament within which Eyre finds himself is, sadly, not negated by Wylie's presence. That Eyre's aloneness is as much a product of his own prejudice and colonial mentality doesn't invalidate the nature of the predicament into which he was convinced he had fallen. That was clearly as much his responsibility as it was a product of Baxter's death. Furthermore, the false presumptions of the explorer himself, and of the society from which he came, has not been repeated by the poem. The point is that poetry need not reflect objective history. The truth of Webb's poem is as he has stated it. He uses Eyre's story as a medium in order to grasp the poetic truth of the human condition: that of the confrontation with desolation, alone and without the solace of convivial human company, exactly as Coleridge's Ancient Mariner found himself in the brutal reality of suffering the vast, deserted expanse of the sea:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide, wide sea!
And never a saint took pity on
My soul in agony.¹¹

That the actuality of Eyre's situation does not bear out this sense of desolate solitude cannot revoke the central issue. Each of us faces our desolation utterly alone, without human consolation, no matter who is present in reality. We are easily alone with our desolation in the midst of a crowd, the crowd that by its very anonymity serves as the face of desolation. That Eyre *ignores* the underlying spirit, as much as he refuses to acknowledge Wylie's validity as a human being, is as much down to himself not "choosing his despair" and what that despair might really tell him, as Kierkegaard would have it, but choosing instead to *live in despair* which is entirely different. For choosing to *live in despair* does not mean to face and learn from the values inherent in despair but *to suffer it* without hope of respite. It is to live in sin, said Kierkegaard.¹² Failing to acknowledge Wylie as a fellow human being, results in Eyre suffering the life of despair inherent in his desolation, incapable of addressing and being addressed by another.

¹¹Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1967) "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Ln. 232-35.

¹²Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 95.

The poem “April 29th” tells how the five men of the expedition have striven together as one. Yet the underlying nature of their beings has hardly been significant enough to bring to consciousness the dialogue that might have granted Eyre and his party that spiritual cohesion. Any purpose for them was to function only according to the dictates of Eyre himself. Their desolate thirst persists; the journey perdures in its rigid despair:

Sleep can hardly disarm the trudging, five
Of us, nor resolve the mystery of our living.¹³

In the mixture of entertaining voices – “Words of Baxter, civil sing-song of our aborigines,” – along with the habits of everyday survival and incessant trudging through the desolation begins to open Eyre to the possibility for spiritual redemption: “Lay open the bight of my soul to a groping beauty.” But how easily is that swept away: “I brush a fly from my head.” His forbearance might yield a presentiment of purpose but he so easily dismisses it and thus the stage is set for disaster. The dread moment dramatically announces itself in a bald stanza of just two lines:

Single drumbeat of thunder and abhorrent light:
My skull is of rebellion and is frightened...¹⁴

Two bare lines to denote the onset of an ill-starred change of circumstances. Yet how much is Eyre, for all his identification of the five men as of “one mind, one body”, so narcissistic that he perceives the disaster purely in terms of his own situation and the many men merely an extension of himself, hardly men at all:

Well, Baxter, here you lie, bleeding and inert,
Across the yellow moon is drawn a curtain.
Your sleep is in a manner mine, I tell you, but a thin
Merciful moonshine turns away from our window:
After her, after her, tramping, taking wing . . .¹⁵

¹³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 267.

¹⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 267.

¹⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 267.

Eyre accuses Baxter of dying. Then the isolation that he sees in consequence of this misadventure strikes him. No room for Baxter here, just a moment of intense self-absorption. The organ stops of a two line stanza bear the same loss and grief of Orfeo, in Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*:

*You are dead, my life, yet I still breathe?
You have left me, never to return,
And I remain here alone?*¹⁶

This is what Francis Webb wrote, capturing in two lines the shocking reality that confronted the horrified Eyre with finality as shocking as it is absolute:

*You are dead. And two other parts of man have fled.
Is there life in my slack fingers to cross the ledger?*¹⁷

The despair and fear and loneliness that trouble Eyre from this moment onwards are captured in three striking single line stanzas (in the *Collected Poems* of 1969). The great chords that conclude Sibelius's fifth symphony are no more striking than these lines stamping their terrifying presence onto the bereft reality of Eyre's subjective desolation, subjective because of the complete self-obsession colouring the whole of his conscious reality with its monstrous, egocentric hues of despair:

*Transfixed in fear and loneliness I burn.

Maimed my brain, maimed my limbs. And a journey —

Daybreak, snigger of dawn. I am alone.*¹⁸

The language harbours both naked, shocking reality and a lingering, belittling parody. Eyre, for all his puffed-up virtue is an object of derision because he has failed to peer into the disclosing spirit that all the time lies to hand. Judgment passes with a snigger.

The repetition of "Walk, walk" from the first poem, underlines the bitterness of Eyre's solitude. As noted before, the parody on heroic couplets doubly emphasizes the irony of its

¹⁶ Alessandro Striggio (1984) [Libretto of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*] (Tr. Christopher Wareham.)

¹⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 268.

¹⁸ Francis Webb (1969) *Collected Poems*: 183.

Biblical allusions. Its dense language is uncompromising, striking a bitter note with uncomfortable rhythms and unconvincing rhymes. In contradistinction to his self-aggrandising image as the solitary hero, Eyre's journey is portrayed with subtle derision, rather like the Servant girl's reaction in *Leichhardt in Theatre*, ridiculing the hero's over-inflated opinion of himself. He persists in the journey, even after the complete dismemberment of the exploration party. This adds further emphasis to his responsibility in persisting in a life of despair.

How can another person be understood solely as an extension of one's own self? Rather than ignoring the difficulties posed by the presence of Wylie, Francis Webb explores the manner in which a human being can be so devalued as to be denied his humanity. Eyre's voice is patronising, dismissive, yet reveals the degree to which he remains completely dependent upon Wylie, expressing the unacknowledged burden shouldered by the aborigine. In the dread and confusion of the death of Baxter and the abandonment of Eyre and Wylie by the other aborigines, Eyre holds himself aloof at the centre. His aloofness, however, stands in tension with his utter existential anguish, on the one hand, and paradoxically with his total reliance on Wylie, on the other. But Eyre's neediness is not reciprocated by the aborigine, who remains detached and self-possessed.

Wylie, the huddled works
Of my soul, in motion:
Three pampered patriarchs
in glib collusion.¹⁹

Such apparent obeisance by Eyre is profoundly cynical. This is made clear in the next stanza. Of only two lines, this stanza, like all the two-lined stanzas marking portentous moments in the life of the expedition, reveals the moral bankruptcy of Eyre:

Mistrust, and hate, and a dark gargantuan sorrow
Are Wylie who will walk with me tomorrow.²⁰

¹⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 269.

²⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 269.

Whose mistrust? Whose hate? And whose sorrow? These do not belong to Wylie but to Eyre. And it is Eyre and his self-absorption which casts Wylie as a mere functionary of his own desolate disillusionment. This is how another human being becomes understood as the mere extension of another's self: Reified to an instrument, thought an *It*, a function, a tool conforming to the whims of arrogant authority.

In his paranoia, what place for dialogue or for the spirit that might arise in true fellowship? Fellowship of this nature can only be between equals. The Biblical reference to James the fisherman – son of Zebedee and brother of John, the beloved disciple – is once again ironic. In *Luke*, at Jesus' behest, the fishermen let down their nets after a night of taking nothing and, to their amazement, they catch a multitude of fish. And henceforth, Simon Peter, James and John become fishers of men – Peter's brother Andrew, identified in this event by *Mathew* and *Mark*, is not mentioned by *Luke*.²¹ But rather than giving himself to following the spiritual path as a disciple, Eyre's profound self-regard takes charge, without trace of any humility:

We evolve our own flies and flames
In the never-never,
Says that rugged fisherman James.
My lapdog will has run wild, fathered, and found me.
My agents listen and finger their weapons round me.²²

That enigmatic final line tells of Eyre's fears the missing pair lurking in the dark with their weapons poised, ready to run him down. He gives his self-centred paranoia free rein. The pair are "my agents," thus subsuming them into a single figure that gathers all the participants in the drama into an extension of himself. Disclosed therein is his unconscious self-loathing. He is contained only in unacknowledged despair, without learning how his despair can bring him spiritual fulfilment in the living waters running beneath his "tableland."

²¹ *Luke* 5: 1-11.

²² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 269.

Hubris and the void

According to Bill Ashcroft, the poem “From the Centre,” coupled with the next, “The Sea,” form a conceptual pair at the very heart of Webb’s poetic cycle.²³ Having reached the centre where he thought the objective of his journey lay, the entrance to an inland sea, Eyre faces his disillusionment with diminishing pride. The final line of each stanza charts the gradual disintegration of his pride in confronting what he perceives as the emptiness at the heart of the continent. The parody on *Exodus* draws our attention to Eyre’s frustrated hopes and destructive compulsions that have driven him to this travesty of a “Promised Land” along the unbroken coast of the Great Australian Bight:

Desert, big stick, or inland sea
Were all the Promised Land to me.
Horses with a gross family tree
Carried my pride.²⁴

And what a travesty it is, without the life-enhancing waters that would yield new prospects for colonial expansion, the realization that without the existence of an inland sea, all his hopes for a British maritime empire in Australia were dashed. And for Eyre, the promise of celebrity in colonial society lay in ruins. His disillusioned anguish is paramount in these few lines. At last he faces the bankruptcy at the heart of his ill-favoured enterprise:

Hag Torrens, ripe for an upstairs murder,
Squeezed the last drops from her limp udder.
No water, never a scrap of fodder
To feed my pride.²⁵

Allusions to cows and horses disclose the fictive pastoral Arcadia that motivated many an exploration of the Australian continent. But instead of verdant beauty, nothing but the “Hag Torrens,” a “hag” described in the dictionary as “a woman supposed to have dealings with the Devil, a witch; an evil woman, an evil spirit or demon in female form, a malicious fairy or

²³ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 150.

²⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 269.

²⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 269.

goblin, or a nightmare conceived of as caused by this,” thought to have originally come from “a kind of hazy light or mist supposedly appearing about a horse’s mane or a human head at night.”²⁶ As well, a “hag” can also be a geographical feature: “A break, gap, or chasm in a crag of cliff.” This presages the “rocky pass down to your place of hiding,” by which Eyre hid from the God of *Isaiah*,²⁷ in the third stanza of “The Sea.” “Torrens” is also a reference to the system of land-titles that was first used in Australia to denote colonial occupation. All these allusions are brought into play by Webb’s terse balladry, bearing the central message of European disillusionment with the Australian landscape as a god-forsaken land, with neither promise nor potential for colonial expansion other than for exploitation by rapacious claimants with little sensitivity for either place or its original inhabitants. This spiritual significance is underscored by the last stanza, on the face of it merely Eyre bemoaning his ill-fortune, as in the rest of the poem, but employing a vocabulary that stands out in clear relief:

The Centre has rolled me as a dice
 Into hot air above tableland, face.
 Remains substantial (by God’s grace)
 Some narrow pride.²⁸

“Tableland” refers back to the “mind’s blank deserted tableland”, from the poem “Water,” in which the unacknowledged spiritual water, “essential sweetness,” flows beneath the tableland, that juts out lonely from the plain. The spiritual water is in reach if he were able to but realize it. Instead he sees only how, on the face of it, “God’s grace” is affective solely in justifying some small measure of pride. That too is a travesty. The stanza, in conjunction with the “Hag Torrens” above, also bears the trace of the terrible spectre-woman (Life-in-death) and her death mate (Death) of Coleridge’s *Rime*, who *diced* for the ship’s crew, the spectre-woman winning the Ancient Mariner alone. One can’t help but imagine the same level of dread and spiritual disfigurement accompanies Eyre on his pointless journey.

²⁶ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Fifth edition. 2002.

²⁷ *Isaiah*. 45: 15.

²⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 270.

As is typical of all the terse ballad-like poems of Webb's maturity, this poem contains a wealth of allusion underlining its complex interaction of parts that point trenchantly into the mystery of the hidden spiritual centre that is not a place but a way of being. This affirmation is made time and again throughout the warp and weft of the poem-cycle with particular insistence, clothed in the garb of Eyre's (and by implication, *our*) on-going folly in pursuing impossible compulsions. That implies we ourselves are the source of our desolation, not an imposition from that which is external to us. Indeed, this also implies that we are able to seek and find the Centre for it does not lie in distant places but in the very fabric of our everyday existential reality, moment to moment. Webb is taking us much further than merely the folly of Eyre's ill-conceived and ill-managed expedition. He is confronting us with our own folly. Yet the poet is also showing the way in which we might ultimately escape the hammer hardness of our desolation through the mystery of the spirit that is also within our own centre of being a being. Like Kierkegaard, Webb discerns that despair and a life lived in despair intrinsically incorporates a seed of its own transcendence should we "choose our despair", the affirmation and acknowledgement of the existential values therein. That seems to indicate how the values inherent in desolation exist also as those values which ultimately lead us from terror in the confrontation with desolation. Eyre's path will eventually bring him into the ascetic desert in which the face of God can be approached directly.

Metaphors of water and life

After the desiccation of "From the Centre" – desiccated in style as well as affirming that desiccation through its metaphors – the next poem in the sequence comes as a complete surprise, for its lush language overflows with rich metaphor, saturating the imagination with a superabundance of physical perceptions. Bill Ashcroft can barely contain his enthusiasm for this poem, with considerable justification granted the complete desiccation of the poems prior to it:

Coupled with the great disillusionment of the centre of the continent, however, comes the arrival at the sea, which in the historical journey is the ecstatic foretaste of success, and in the poem, a moment which represents the real moment of

illumination. “The Sea” is structurally the central poem of the series (number 7 of 13), and is the statement of that principle which first emerged in “Water”. Its most striking feature is the texture and range of its imagery, a dense and variegated saturation of the senses which perhaps reveals that the true discovery is simply that illumination is available at any time. The most important image is that of sound in stanza one, a recognition that the end of the journey, the Sound, is embedded in each moment.²⁹

The embedding of *sound* as a hidden metaphor for its homonym, *the Sound*, towards which Eyre’s party is headed, restates the water theme of this cycle. Sound, the sound of water – the Southern Ocean breaking against the great cliffs of the Bight – and the life associated with water, including the tireless wheeling gulls, speaks of the questing soul seeking the moment of enlightenment in a distant place when that enlightenment is readily available in the immediate spirit that streams beneath the tablelands of our desolate isolation, linking us all to a community of being. One is reminded here of the “ground of being,” an expression used by theologian Paul Tillich to denote the meaning of God in existential reality as our “ultimate concern”.³⁰ Spiritual *water* and compassionate *light* pay homage to such a God in the hidden ground of our being. The sound obscurely points towards The Sound, as a “metaphor.” Yet strictly speaking this is not obviously a metaphor. However, the Sound secretes within the sound of the language and the sounds it recreates, creating an implied metaphorical *is* couched within the semantically true *is-not*, acts precisely the same way as a properly orchestrated metaphor. Francis Webb continues to choose the “little, obscure way,” exactly as he announced in his poem “Cap and Bells”.

Webb treats nature with supreme lyricism, returning us to the natural theology that underlies his most lyrical writing. Yet, that natural theology is implicit in the metaphors Webb employs. His language opens a *clearing* within which the meeting with God can take place, thereby bringing the eternal into relation with physical and temporal reality. That is, the lyrical moment bears the stamp of God in ecstatic ascendancy without becoming divorced from the concrete moment.

²⁹W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 151. Actually there are 14 poems – CJW.

³⁰Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 173.

Corsage of maiden Bight would cleave to you,
And cliffs, tall jealous knighthood, glowering over
Surf-bunches of your breast afloat in bells.
Old cranky carillons creak skyward, duly hover.
And you murmur as a flight of syllables
The résumé, steep and voluble, of the gulls.³¹

But the alternative is an empty pall of intellect, physically and existentially dislocated by the “skirting ice and coral of your castle walls” from the joy of a true connection with *light* and *water*, the two major metaphors for the spiritual dimension in human existence that dominates Francis Webb’s poetry:

I observe your lovers. A lank sophisticate moon
Would have you every night embrace his laws,
Is feckless and faceless when suspicion galls.
Or the gallant sun advances and withdraws
Skirting ice and coral of your castle walls,
At sunset rolls in his blood under the gulls.³²

But this castle redoubt preventing connection with the life-giving waters, even in Eyre’s case, can be in part breached. Nothing is absolutely impervious to the spirit, even if for a bare fragmented second:

Barriers of knighthood yield an instant, I
Find a rocky pass down to your place of hiding,
And join the thousand other lovesick fools.³³

In a poignant line, Webb opens up the metaphysical possibility that hampers Eyre’s and by implication our struggle for that which is meaningful. “Beauty,” he wrote, “is walled in freedom.” But a freedom that is walled in is not freedom, the metaphorical dynamic between the *Is* and the *Is-not* is played out here with particular vehemence. The double-bind imparted by the paradox of this situation is notably bitter. Eyre is *enslaved* by his compulsions, as we all might

³¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 270.

³² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 270.

³³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 270.

be should we fail to heed the ever-present spirit hidden beneath the carapace of desolation. In that desert, who could come to know the freedom underlying all being, were we to grasp the authenticity within the ground of our being a being and become – *choose* – ourselves? The appearances are certainly against it. But there seems to be no beauty here in the desolate country for the desolate explorer, nothing at all approximating the colonial pastoral ideal of conventional beauty. Definitely nothing for those deaf to the gull’s freedom song:

East to west no elegant rivers, pools
Outcrops of thought mope on in sulkiness.
Pens buzz for honey – but could the whitest souls
Absorb these vespers, counterpoint of gulls?³⁴

There is despair in these words. Yet this poem, in its joyous acclamation of “these vespers, counterpoint of gulls,” marks an intimation of the turning that the explorer must eventually reach. We see it most particularly in the final line of each stanza, collectively marking a process of turning from the neutral “résumé, steep and voluble, of the gulls” of the first stanza, the mockery of “the cynical halloos of the gulls” of the third, to the “blue is the grave pure language of the gulls” of the last. Eyre *anticipates* his spiritual illumination, what Graham Wallas once called “intimation.”³⁵

Therefore I walk squinting at chaste blue,
Unwashed, in a corona of rotten clothing,
Over marvellous flagstones in her sacred halls.
Blue is the Sound, form, essence out of nothing;
Blue is Today harnessed, nodding at my heels;
Blue is the grave pure language of the gulls.³⁶

Webb’s Catholicism emerges into clear view in this stanza, for it is as obvious that the “chaste blue” refers not only to the blue of the overarching sky (and thus also to metaphysical *heaven*) but to the dominant icon of the Catholic church, the protective blue cloak of the

³⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 271.

³⁵ Graham Wallas (1945) *The Art of Thought*: 52-57.

³⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 271.

Madonna, the Virgin Mary. The bedraggled wretchedness of the explorer's situation, "unwashed, in a corona of rotten clothing," marks his penitence across the spiritual landscape "over marvellous flagstones in her sacred halls," exactly like the unwashed Franciscan brethren accompanying St Francis nervously crept forward across the fabulously bejewelled papal hall to an audience with the Pope. Eyre thus assumes the mantle of the "drab mendicant" mentioned in "Water," still seeking some sort of absolution at journey's end, but much more amenable to its possibilities. And we learn what the *Sound* really means in its spiritual essence: "Blue is the Sound, form, essence out of nothing." Yet there is also a sting in the following line because Eyre has not yet freed his spiritual essence from the shackles of ego, "blue is today harnessed, nodding at my heels," though at least he is coming to acknowledge it. His turning has barely begun. How easily it will falter. When the omens appear positive, Eyre easily reverts to his colonial mindset, thus denying himself the potential for stepping out from his dread necessity into new spiritual possibility. He is still trapped in his "narrow pride." Nowhere is this more apparent than in the poem "Aboriginals."

Walking through a landscape haunted by its original inhabitants, who are feared yet will rescue the "great Expedition" from death by thirst, Eyre will eventually follow the Aborigines' footprints to water. The aborigines are the messengers of spiritual joy and the holy being from which Eyre has been banished by his own egotism. He cowers from them in the night, his time hanging heavy for he even notes the exact moment, "eleven exactly", someone lets out a cry of joy or of welcome.³⁷

But he maintains the rifle by his side, rather than stepping forward to meet them. He is defensive, utterly distanced from reaching out to their spiritual joy. Though the illusive aborigines lead him to water, that ever-present metaphor for spiritual enlightenment, Eyre still succumbs to delusions of self-importance. His horses judge these pretensions in like manner to the donkeys that reduced Leichhardt's second expedition to high farce, but without the donkeys'

³⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 271.

brazen comedy to despoil his inflated pride. Eyre presents himself without that sense of humour that might have curtailed his most extreme hubris.

Once in the hungry scrub
Leaves and branches came together as a shadow,
Made sleekness rippling, running about out of earshot.
Innumerable times the great Expedition of my thought
Has gone to pieces,
Frightened horses galloping in all directions.³⁸

Yet it must be noted that Eyre addresses the aborigines in the second-person, that might ambiguously also be an address to Wylie or to God: “You are everywhere at once.” That single line stanza comes like a great chord of recognition with a brief deep bass note, quite distinct from the operatic melodrama of the two-lined stanza announcing Baxter’s demise. The aborigines are no longer simply a “them” marginalized by his colonial attitude. Though his “great Expedition” repeatedly fragments under the supposed pressure from these alien beings – the unknown others – nevertheless the direct address to them bears the imprint of a change of heart. Suspiciously, he follows their guidance to the waterhole but how can he overcome the colonial hubris that pervades his narrow, deluded mind.

He is incapable of loving another, except his own glorification, a parody of the love for God and for all creation; parodying the sacrament in “dry bread like stone in my mouth”; parodying the days of creation in *Genesis*, and in his profound egoism, his own suffering stands paramount. But this is as much a product of his own self-imposed isolation: “These days I hardly say a word to Wylie.” So his address to Wylie or God might be as much as towards the hidden aborigines haunting him:

You are beyond me – and so often
Dangerously close, it seems I do not look for
Truce, rule of life; but gratefully follow your footprints
To water, water on the fifth day.³⁹

³⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 271.

³⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 272.

It is the possibility of relation in the human, very human gesture, which provides the true water of life. That was a central theme of “The Canticle” and here we discover it again but in its negative form, for without relation there is no salvation. God remains undisclosed to the person incapable of even relating with the human being next to him. Yet, the footprints of the aborigines that lead Eyre and Wylie to water on the fifth day is a miniscule form of relation, a lacuna between the passing aborigines and the expeditionary pair. Perhaps we should note how on the Fifth Day of Creation, God created all the creatures that live in the waters,⁴⁰ in a real sense symbolic of the *living water*. There we grasp that although Eyre comes to the water and drinks, he has not grasped yet the symbolic baptism brought about by water.

This becomes entirely apparent in the next repeat of “Walk, walk”. Its gravity bears a greater weight as of each tiring expeditionary, walking more slowly, heavily, stumbling with less hope in their hearts, less pride in their achievements and attempts, yet with an awful emphasis upon Eyre’s compulsive drive to travel ever onwards: “But something on foot, and burning, nudges us /Through bitter waters, sands of Exodus.”

A stronger sense of devastation accompanies its ever deepening gravity, dragging the feet slower as the reading is itself slowed. Thereby undertaking a greater attention to the details of this single stanza poem, the reader recognizes its word-for-word repetition but in the new context with quite different surrounding poems. Accordingly, although the verse is repeated word-for-word, the result is exactly a formal variation. Here, the stubbornness of Eyre’s poverty-stricken vision takes on religio-mythic proportions while lapsing into absurdity and deeper parody. Yet for all that he is not entirely bereft of spirit. The same pretensions of self-glorification, revealed in the allusions to the Exodus story, also bear more than a hint of possible revelation, for the objective of Moses’ quest was the scaling of Mount Sinai to confront his God. So it would seem for Eyre as well, provided he overcomes his hubris.

⁴⁰Genesis. 1:20-23.

The signs of redemption

In describing the pack horse as it munches on a handful of dry chaff, the poet passes a keen eye over the national fictions that grew from colonial heroes like Eyre. Eyre is making the final push towards the Sound and before he does so, he will release the horses from their servitude. The pack horse stands as a metaphor for Eyre's entrapment within the colonial vision. His *necessity* (Kierkegaard) is to fulfil this vision without contracting the spiritual ascendancy of the moment that might eventually grant redemption. How like the rest of us in living our excruciating lives bowed down by tedium and mere entertainment designed to avoid that tedium, tedious in itself. How like the desolation that still weighs at the souls of a nation that holds more value in the empty symbols of office than to the spirit in a single flowering plant or in this sparkling moment. History is no longer the great colonial adventure:

History, wasted and decadent pack horse
Munching a handful of chaff, dry old national motives,
Shambles skinny and bony into the final push,
Picking up, putting down his heavy tuneless hooves
Girt with rusted iron, so tenderly.⁴¹

Yet as is typical of Webb, these pathetic remnants of colonialism are still treated with sympathy for the struggling horse who symbolizes that waning delusion. By contrast, the title of the poem, "Banksia," speaks of the flowering of the land in all its nativity; the land making itself known to the colonial explorer through the presence of the flowering plant that it supports and nourishes, just as it supports and nourishes the aborigines who proved to be Eyre's saviours in leading him to water. But possibly of greater significance, the banksia as a coastal plant signals the proximity of the coastline bordering the Sound and Eyre is filled with exaltation. At the same time, Eyre is perhaps coming to acknowledge his true situation, Baxter's death and his fellow companion, Wylie, still by his side through all their trials and tribulations:

Baxter is dead. Wylie, can you hear the Sound?⁴²

⁴¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 272.

⁴² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 272.

But Wylie does not reply, for the question is not taken as a real address. Wylie is still only a replacement for Baxter. He can only be considered a person solely on the basis that Baxter is seen through him. Eyre provides his own answer:

I hear large agnostic ribaldries of an ocean.⁴³

When Wylie replies to Eyre, the indentation in the poem makes it clear another voice speaks. The approaching evening eventually stills the sun-storm and the intolerable glare. In that glare, the obscuring reality blinds them to the dream of “epic adventure” and to the glare of publicity that will greet Eyre’s return to colonial society. That now seems but a mere dream tested against reality and found wanting. Indeed, the laying to rest of the colonial dream is accomplished through a relationship with the land and the other. That dream is now seen for all its second-hand, ludicrous absurdity:

But suns will rock in my sleep, maul the moth-eaten pockets
Of memory for a few counterfeit coppers
To thump on the counters of stalls in a looted market.⁴⁴

He asks Wylie what he sees and his companion replies for the first time: “I see a flower.” That flower is the banksia and its appearance before them proves their long journey is nearing its goal. This is where Eyre turns his horses loose, a metaphor for his turning aside from the colonial fictions. “Turn the horses loose. Out of earth a power.” The earth itself is now becoming the dominant determinant of Eyre’s vision. He is close to the spirit of the moment:

Banksia, honeysuckle, forked-lightning-fruit of pain.
Motive pierces the cloud-scrub once again.⁴⁵

Heaven is written in the land and its plants. And he touches the life-giving water in the moment that marks the full entrance of the spirit into his life. Eyre confronts the desolation within himself the very moment he acknowledges the spirit in the land that is already transforming him. There is tenderness in these lines:

⁴³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 272.

⁴⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 272.

⁴⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 273.

Banksia, carry fire, like the thurifer
Over my sandy tongue-tied barren ground.⁴⁶

The image of the Banksia leading the religious procession in the incense-swinging figure of the thurifer towards the altar of the Sound, also introduces the reader to this delicate spirit centre, would we but acknowledge it. The question that Eyre now puts to Wylie is whispered in the “tongue-tied” hush of fellowship. And Wylie’s reply is also whispered:

Wylie, what do you hear?

I hear the Sound.⁴⁷

Poetry rarely becomes more tender or more personal than this and yet the utter simplicity of the words disguises their ontological importance. They are lightly spoken in a whisper, yet they carry such existential significance without flinching, for this is a moment, full of gravity, plunging to the ground of being a being, delivered in a hushed, unforced voice bearing its burden with ease. Eyre has now left behind his despair. He has stripped away all his pretensions of colonial glory, of the over-inflated pomposity of his expedition and thus of himself, and of the morally bankrupt desire for social acclaim. He has travelled the ascetic’s path of self-discipline and physical deprivation.

Images of self-deprecation now emerge with good humour, although this is not an emotion we normally associate with the ascetic’s path. But the ascetic’s path is bright and firm, belonging to the whole person, not the partial person bound by and to the external accoutrements and discourses with which we ordinarily identify ourselves. The hermit, emaciated from his spiritual exercises but free from the burden of his demons, enters the vicinity of Cape Arid, like the original anchorite St Antony arriving at Mt Colzim,⁴⁸ his desert mountain and final refuge:

Colour of old goatskin,
The eremite is in town:
A-twinkle glasses of sin

⁴⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 273.

⁴⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 273.

⁴⁸ James Cowan (2002) *Journey to the Inner Mountain: In the Desert with St Anthony*: 1 ff.

Go up, down.⁴⁹

The “glasses of sin” are shed, shown for what they are, the mere fragments of a mechanism which can only watch on like an uninvolved spectator. Reflected in the gaunt but luminous terseness of these ballad lines, shorn of all unnecessary adornment, the landscape appears both desiccated and bleak, every superfluity stripped away, yet it is now a profoundly spiritual land revealing the spirit in its barest essence. That essence is reflexive. Eyre is in a state of grace.

Mapped case-sheeted Cape Arid
Wordless as stonefall,
Your dogmatic forehead
Answers them all.
Let heretical surf erode
Weary old courage,
An outline quotes me God
On my pilgrimage.⁵⁰

The self-deprecation of these lines prevails over false. The lightly rhyming lines trip off the tongue, ordaining the spiritual quest with the slightest hint of self-mockery. The spiritual centre lies close at hand. We need not undertake the arduous and costly exertion in order to disclose it in our everyday lives. All that’s required is an acknowledgement of our own finitude in the face of eternity.

“The dingo’s canticle /Is sweet as water” tells of the sanctified land, while Eyre’s celebration, having accomplished his goal, is toasted with “wattle and cabbage plant,”⁵¹ humbly and without fanfare. While the “patrimony is spent /Inland,” indicates the inheritance the colonial baggage of received belief and prejudice in the advance of imperial institutions across the globe and Australia in particular, has been shed. That is also played out in Eyre’s interpersonal relation with Wylie, who will become the thurifer, taking over from the Banksia.

⁴⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 273.

⁵⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 273.

⁵¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 274.

But although they have achieved a state of spiritual grace, the privations of the journey have taken a dreadful toll upon them. The expedition is on its last legs when it encounters the whaling camp at Thistle Cove. Wylie already knew the spiritual heartland lay ready to hand but was never able to convey his knowledge to the expedition's leader, whose over-weening pride presented an insuperable barrier to receiving of any revelation until he had trodden the ascetic path through the desiccating desert. But this ascetic journey has rendered the expedition vulnerable to further suffering. As Bill Ashcroft notes, "when they stagger into Thistle Cove, [they are] assailed not only by distance but also time itself."⁵² They are confronted by their own radical finitude:

And the mind, old anthill and goods depot,
Entertains time grinning in his butchers apron;
Memory, the capacious and gluttonous engine,
Drools, hiccups obedience:
A truckful of minutes wedged tight are bleating dourly:
Dawn, night; light, dark; the eternal.⁵³

Wylie still belongs to the moment, transcending even the weakened state to which they have been reduced. Eyre responds to Wylie, still mourning Baxter, but also realizing his terrible folly, or as Bill Ashcroft argues, "Eyre sees the carcasses of time, and even the colour of the "eternal", the blue of sky and sea, and the great time-slaughtered belly of the sun as the metaphors of his own death"⁵⁴:

Yes I see. Sky and ocean, you remark, are a blue
– Of the slaughtered; yes, the sun – the great belly and our carcass
Hanging with an emaciated horse or two
Upon hooks of colour; yes, and shadows crawling . . .⁵⁵

As they enter Thistle Cove, they espy a sail and at the end of their tether, Eyre shouts out, they must signal the ship: "Grace of God! Fire rifles, shout, wave handkerchiefs!" Everything is

⁵² W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 153.

⁵³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 274.

⁵⁴ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 154.

⁵⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 274.

cast into a sacred light yet self-deprecatory, even the most ordinary hope of rescue from their destitution: “our doggerel prayer.” The ship riding at anchor in the nearby Lucky Bay comes to be portrayed as the “gracious sacramental barque,” the sign of their deliverance so very different from the demonic barque of “The Ancient Mariner,” whose “ribs are seen as bars on the face of the setting sun.”⁵⁶ Here Wylie takes the place of suppliant and of thurifer: “On your knees, Wylie, coax leaf-smoke upward for incense.”⁵⁷ They are heard and seen and summoned by the ship’s crew.

The metaphors now turn upon Eyre’s childhood from his “birth-howl,” as if their recovery on board the whaling ship represents a new birth and a new life. And yet, the old hunger to head out onto the open road still predominates: “That same white grace beyond the window ledge /Lures me again into old disconsolate lands.” The vision of his boyhood stays only at the threshold of life. The safe harbour, to which they have come, merely serves to distance Eyre from his true vocation. He must leave the portals of its safety once more to confront the ascetic lands for the journey to the Sound:

The Ridings, green fare of boyhood, can take form
Only it seems at creation’s very edge.
I quench the lantern with my own two hands
And stare out gingerly into the storm.⁵⁸

“And on towards Jericho,” the Sound is the great finale to the metaphor of the Exodus that haunted his every footstep. But we are being prepared to revisit that Biblical allusion in identifying the Sound with Jericho. This context will determine the interpretation of the last repeat of the “Walk, walk” promenade theme. Rumours of war between England and France disturb the spiritual ascendancy of Eyre but they do not ruin his hard won peace:

Captain Rossiter shakes hands:
On towards Jericho.
He fears that war between England

⁵⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1967) “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (Prose gloss): ln. 185-6.

⁵⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 275.

⁵⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 275.

And France may have broken out –
A stone to shatter the image
Of stained glass before me.⁵⁹

“War: I bow my head /To stones and shellfire of England.” The last two lines of this poem ask a very pertinent question in the face of the war, of all war, something that must have considerable significance for the poet, both as a trained participant and as a man at war with himself because of schizophrenia:

Lord, who is my neighbour
On the long road to the Sound?⁶⁰

But doesn't Eyre recognize yet the neighbourliness of his truly present companion, Wylie? When the world is at war, are there any people we might call “neighbours”? It was Jericho that, according to the *Bible*, was taken by Joshua's army in the war against the Canaanites. It is perhaps expedient to view the war as a metaphor for the Biblical war.

“Walk, Walk.” This final repetition of the promenade theme takes us from parody into the sacred land of the spirit. The “bitter waters,” through which the pair are nudged, mark the ascendancy of the ascetic path, expunging the sins of the flesh, and cleansing the soul in readiness for the mystical bonding of spirit and God in the eternity of the timeless moment. The near encounter with the Sound, the metaphor of Jericho, towards which the Israelites are campaigning, represents the promised land of the spirit:

But something on foot, and burning, nudges us
Through bitter waters, sands of Exodus.⁶¹

The verse retains its discomfort, straining all endurance with the hair-shirt of the anchorite and flesh-denying dialectic opposing flesh (*sarka*) with spirit (*psyche*). Yet how foregrounded is the battle with one's bodily needs. Only those who encompass the projections of fleshly desire feel the need to disassociate in dread from its power to promote the sin of concupiscence. This dialectic, therefore, provides the grounding by which the spirit is liberated

⁵⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 276.

⁶⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 276.

⁶¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 277.

from its existential finitude. Yet one grasps the essential point from Webb that such a dialectic can only be useful, in the end, to make the ignorant person aware of the spirit that is always in reach. The ascetic path of self-denial need not be necessary after all.

Solitude and the spirit

The expedition finally comes to its final destination and its participants reach their personal destinies. How different those destinies will be. Wylie will be claimed by his aboriginal brethren leaving Eyre finally alone with himself and his spiritual centre. Both will be brought into a spiritual location after the dread dislocation of the earlier parts of their expeditionary travels. They behold the sacred geometry, like that which informs the design of a cathedral, in the natural world around them, yet it is a geometry in which they partake.⁶² The rain falls directly from heaven, like a baptismal blessing, yet the “scourged eyeball” recalls both the scourged Christ hanging vertical on his cross and the removal from vision of all the encrusted fictions presumed by colonial expansion. The natural world holds a benediction in the nurturing shape of the mountains, its Marian imagery typically subtle. Throughout, we gain the overall importance of the vision from the “scoured eyeball” to the summons to “look hard at horses, goods, firearms,” and “spare a glance /To the honest countryside under your foot and about you.”⁶³ And like the holy rivers of antiquity, the Styx, the Acheron, the Jordan, and so forth, across which lay Paradise, whether as Heaven, Eden, or Promised Land, the last great act of any life is seen as the crossing over, precisely as Mr Standfast crossed over the sacred river to the Celestial City in John Bunyan’s immortal *Pilgrim’s Progress*:

And he said, This river has been a terror to many; yea, the thoughts of it also have often frightened me; but now methinks I stand easy; my foot is fixed upon that on which the feet of the priest that bare the ark of the covenant stood while Israel went over this Jordan. (*Josh.* iii. 17.) I see myself now at the end of my journey; my toilsome days are ended. I am going to see that head which was crowned with thorns, and that face which was spit upon for me. I have formerly lived by hearsay

⁶² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 277.

⁶³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 277.

and faith; but now I go where I shall live by sight, and shall be with him in whose company I delight myself.⁶⁴

In a single line, Webb speaks of crossing the Jordan:

We struggle through the last ditch of the King's River.⁶⁵

On the other side of the sacred river, Wylie is carried off by a party of his fellow tribesmen, back to the holy nature where his brethren have dwelt:

[H]e is taken back to earth,
He is growth, he is a gallant tree in flower,
He is unbound geometries of the good soil.⁶⁶

Wylie's salvation is inherently communal as he is returned to his tribe, his land and his dreaming. On the other hand, Eyre has at last been left entirely alone. His redemption from the shoddy mirage of the colonial vision is to be found in the ascetic reduction of the ego. Like Wylie, he too assumes the mantle of sacred nature but in an existential way, set aside from the communal accomplishment of Wylie's spirituality. Eyre cannot go that way because his community is dominated by the sort of colonial fictions that launched him into his desolation in the first place. Now, Eyre is stripped of all these delusions and expectations. He is naked before the spiritual heart in his complete solitude, yet utterly ostracized from the false blandishments of his society precisely because he has entered this state of grace:

Looking down, or up, at the town from the brow of the hill
I am truly alone. And hardly visible now
The straight grey lines. I am coming. I am rainfall,
And all the doors are closed and stilled the merrymaking.⁶⁷

His journey marks more than the turning towards the spiritual heart, for the journey encompasses his whole life, from metaphors of childhood to the decrepit appearance of old age.

⁶⁴ John Bunyan (1862) *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 364-5.

⁶⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 277.

⁶⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 277.

⁶⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 277-8.

Bill Ashcroft asserts the trek has not merely seemed to take as long as his whole life but has constituted the journey in which he has invested the *whole* of his life.⁶⁸

One year on the march, an epoch, all of my life.

But their faces will be golden when the doors open,
Their dress shining. My torn stinking shirt, my boots,
And hair a tangle of scrub; the long knotted absurd beard
This is my conscience grown in the desert country.⁶⁹

The final line of the poem-cycle brings Eyre out of the desert's desolation into the ascetic fulfilment of the vision that was first glimpsed in "The Sea." Webb returns us to the vision of everyday spirituality in the distant figure of Francis walking the road, the spiritual hub around which "The Canticle" had been spun: That Someone is perhaps also the distant figure of Jesus. Certainly, this unknown is the redemptive Other to whom we point in all our authentic relations, that spiritual hub to which even Francis pointed with his deeply human gestures of care. The journey from the ecclesiastical "east to west" has been accomplished, as has the early description of the journey as of "Man to man. Which is sometimes /God to man." The eternal spiritual centre is there before us in ordinary, everyday reality. Webb accomplishes his projection of the spiritual in everyday reality with consummate ease and simplicity:

But the rain has stopped. On the main road Someone moves.⁷⁰

The main road is both the return of Eyre to civilisation but also a metaphor for the pathway to the silent eclipsed God. Bill Ashcroft affirmed a point, the core of which emerged so poignantly in Webb's "The Canticle," that is entirely reminiscent of Martin Buber's interpersonal philosophy:

Now we see why Eyre's aloneness had been so important – for the vision of the divine is at the same time the vision of the Other. Man's communion with God is both symbolised and actualised in his communion with others. The true success of

⁶⁸ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 154.

⁶⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 278.

⁷⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 278.

the journey through the soul is the rediscovery of the world in its simplicity, for it is in such simplicity [...] that the transcendent is accessible. If we see this resolution in the context of the horizon of schizophrenia we may recognize something of the actual heroism of this perception. The journey through “ugliness and agony” is a journey through a world which continually presents itself as dangerous and threatening. That the ultimate and transcendent goal is seen as a coming to terms with this world signifies the immense personal drama the journey theme enacts in the poetry.⁷¹

If we are to identify that which is essential to the conclusion of this chapter, it is the central thread of the authentic relation with the eclipsed God through our communion with others and with nature and the land that proves to be the core affirmation of this particular poetic cycle. All the metaphors have pointed towards this conclusion right from the start. Yet we discover how much the confrontation with desolation, in whatever form it takes, serves as the predominant characteristic motivating the spiritual quest, for it strips away all the concrete accretions of fictitious assumptions and personal evasions preventing true communion with others and with the transcendent Other. The confrontation with desolation thus serves not merely as the source of the double-bind of despair but as the central means by which the ascetic path to the transcendent can actually be constituted. For without this motivating factor, how would we ever realize the naked reality of ourselves within the world and within our life with others?

Affirmation, as a critical issue in the philosophical study of poetry, reveals how much its existential value serves to transcend the abstraction that alerted us to its existence in the first place. That existential value can only come into play when the reader is willing and able to engage with the words, accepting them as the testimony of the poet as witness. To what are we being called to witness? Surely Francis Webb was not present when Eyre made his eventful journey across the Great Australian Bight. On the contrary, what is being made abundantly clear is not an objective affidavit but something far more primary to the human spirit: her or his act of being; an act of being a being that calls upon each of us to reflect upon our own acts of being a

⁷¹ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 155.

being in order to promulgate the meaning of the poem and the meaning of ourselves. Francis Webb, like all poets, is speaking the words to reflect core human values in relation with the world and with ourselves. Poetry, in its ability to make these affirmations possible, opens the ontological realm of the meaningful. Edward Eyre in Webb's *Eyre All Alone* is himself a metaphor for the being of each and every person, including the poet himself, as Bill Ashcroft has so ably argued. Such understanding entails that in poetic affirmation, the hounds of desolation that hunt us day and night, are held at bay precisely at the point we are able to acknowledge our own desolation. The nihilism lurking beneath postmodernism seems a little less pervasive than it was before.

Theory Chapter V

On relation: faith and doubt in poetic vocation

Should incompleteness and mystery represent two alternative if dialectically related modes of description – the latter, an *ontological* description called forth by the former *hermeneutic* description, essentially coeval – a third descriptor also coeval to them is called forth by a further dialectical leap. *Enrichment* and *affirmation* were terms I used to identify existential consequences of the interaction between meaning and mystery, expressing that which is hidden within the silences of incompleteness and poetic mystery. A *more inclusive and richer* dialectical description emerges more bountiful in its explanation, extending beyond the boundaries set by the foregoing modes. Yet this new dialectical level incorporates the lessons of Incompleteness and Mystery, and the two interlineated descriptions of Enrichment and Affirmation, into a new synthesis, a new more inclusive dialectical description that emerges clearly upon the “armature” or negative created by Mystery, itself built upon Incompleteness. Indeed, we have already mooted it, for mystery clearly *calls it forth* as it calls the reader forth. When the poem called for the reader to *point towards* the mystery of the poem, the third mode of description was already intrinsically in evidence but largely silent. Mystery called it forth but could not cross the threshold of this new dialectical level without a new discourse. This third dialectic description we can identify as the *primary relation* with the *Thou*.

The primary relation

Discussing poetic affirmation revealed to us how the words of the poem bind all interpretations into a single whole. Furthermore, the words of the poem wend their way through the descriptive modes without respecting our convenient categories. Yet in granting this power to the poem, we needed to appeal to the *eclipsed figure of the poet* as guarantor of its personal value, although this directly contradicts a central article of faith for postmodernists – Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida – who expunged the *person* and the *personal* from their hermeneutics, even though they were to maintain the writer as a “function”. Yet, immediately we were

confronted by a significant relation: the relation between poet and reader. Will this be the primary relation of the work?

This question reaches to the core of the enigma that is poetry. While we are called *as readers* to witness the poem in making its affirmation, the primary relation need not necessarily lie between poet and reader unless it is a poetic missive, such as a love-poem. The direct communication thus implied would serve to block access to the poem's mystery. A poetic missive opens up the mystery of the relation between the poet and her or his reader, thereby locating the poem and the reader in relation with its mystery accordingly. However, in all other poetry, the person of the poet would loom too greatly, thus breaking the guarantee for poetic affirmation. Indeed, if it were only a question of the poet talking directly to the reader, the affirmation would not be possible at all. Moreover, the poet-reader relation is essentially *indirect* in that the person of the poet, although guarantor of the poem, nevertheless stands aside from the content of the poem. The poet remains the speaker and it is her or his voice, but this personal contact is rather the *medium* for another relation. Were this not the case, the person of the poet would overflow the poem thereby blocking all other relation. This implies a degree of detachment on the part of the poet. Yet, as before, it will neither be a negation of poet nor reader. That is the substantive error of the postmodernists.

Furthermore, a direct poet-reader relation as the primary relation runs the risk of reducing poetry to a form of *entertainment*. However, poetry cannot be identified with entertainment for fundamental reasons. Entertainment expresses a *diversion*, in which a person is diverted from her or his life. That is, it *removes* the person from existence, even from a person's communal existence with other members of the audience. The entertained audience becomes swept up into an imaginary place without returning to being at all, except in the limited capacity of registering pleasure. The traditional theatrical audience might be entertained to some extent, but the necessity for personal connection to the poetry of the play invokes a quite different relation. Entertainment needs no guarantor.

A fundamental act in the reading of a poem is the *drawing of the reader into a relation with the world*, to be brought into personal selfhood through an *act* of being as a being and understood through that sense of being a being. The *poet's* primary relation occurs as an orientation towards the world, in which the poet's sense of being a being *calls* in the poem another existent (a being, as such) to step forth within a sense of its *being there* in its exclusivity. That relation, rather than *containing* the other being or its image – as *representation theory* and *picture theory*¹ hold – realizes a *facing towards* that being by entailing an *attitude*. A being won't be appropriated or co-opted into the poem.

Human beings standing out from the world and from each other, *speak their relation with the world*. Poetry is made possible as a speaking to the world. We can only speak to something when it is primarily placed at a distance. While there are no limits to the world, excepting insofar as it paradoxically includes and does not include the one who stands opposite it, the self who speaks stands apart in her or his finitude. This implies ontological finitude must, by necessity, be written into poetry as it is for all types of discourse, for infinite-being neither has the requisite detachment by which to face the world nor any need of poetry. The poet is not a god. Only a finite being needs to write or read poetry. The reader's relation with the poem, and by implication with the poet, is made possible because the poet has already set down a primary relation in words, a principal relation with the world, by speaking *I-Thou*, Martin Buber's much preferred "primary word".² Now we can put a face to the *attitude* accomplished by the poem, that which invites an essential relation.³ *I-Thou* fulfils the *attitude* intrinsic to a poem's affirmation: "Were there no more genuine dialogue, there would also be no more poetry."⁴

It is important to clear up a common misunderstanding concerning the philosophy of Martin Buber, which underlines the greater part of this chapter. This misunderstanding assumes that we only have another human being for our *Thou*. But a *Thou* need not be a human being at

¹Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 2.11.

² Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 3 ff.

³ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 170.

⁴ Martin Buber (1965b) *The Knowledge of Man*: 111.

all. I might have a tree or a cat for my *Thou* or indeed, a landscape or a magical moment in time. No-one who has read *I and Thou*, Buber's philosophical prose poem, would be left in any doubt that the *Thou* can be any being, non-human, human or spiritual. Certainly, Buber favours both the inter-human relation and the relation with God over all others, but he does not deny to the rock, the tree or the animal the possibility of being my *Thou*.

Speaking *Thou* to what or to whom? Speaking *Thou* to that which *calls* on the poet to be *called forth* into poetry. Poetic creativity, like all true creativity, is profoundly *dialogical*. Yet it is the poet who speaks. The primary relation is, therefore, the poet-world relation to which we, the poem's readers, are invited to *bear witness*. Although the poem's concrete presence eclipses the poet, nevertheless the poem is written in the voice of the poet. How much a writer's voice is made present, even when veiled by translation from one language to another, was made clear to me upon reading a number of books by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis. Although each book had a different translator, the *style* of the original voice communicated itself. I gained a sense of Kazantzakis's personal voice, eventually becoming proficient in recognizing his voice from a just few lines. How much more so will this sense of the writer's *voice* be communicated to a reader through poetry written in the reader's own language? Poetry brings the personal voice into clear prominence. Yet that which makes a voice "personal" is that which orients the speaker to the *Thou*: the poem is the speaking of "*I-Thou*".

Still that *sense of being a being* lies at the heart of reading and understanding a poem, for it is essential to the poet speaking *Thou* in the poem. The poet bears witness and we are called in turn to witness this testimony – to say *Thou* along with the poet. The poet is the speaking centre – the *origin* at the centre of the poem, as Bachelard would have it⁵ – granting the poem its manifest actuality. That is how the poem penetrates to the core of human existence as not merely the thing that is said but by the person who speaks the Word, that eclipsed guarantor we had occasion to encounter in the last theory chapter.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard (1969) *The Poetics of Space*: xvi.

Faith and doubt

Affirmation, an act of being in response to the recurrent literary *Is* of poetic metaphor, also responds to the metaphor's literal and paradoxical *Is-not*. This affirmational *Is* draws on that aspect of *faith*, claiming a personal act of under/standing: "Here I stand!" Its intrinsic antithesis, *Is-not*, has its personal response in the counteracting ever-present *doubt* that accompanies all deep faith. Without the literal *is-not* entreating us to doubt, affirmation and our faith in it would neither be possible nor perdure beyond the moment. Doubt is necessary to the projection of faith to the ground of our being, making that faith meaningful because it is faith in a revealed mystery *qua* mystery. By using "faith" and "doubt" to describe the dimensions of our excavation of the primary relation in poetry, we escape the vicissitudes of abstraction that hound the logical problematic of poetic metaphor. Faith and its attendant doubt are a response to the call made to us in the words of the poem. We are called upon to participate in the poem through our own faith and doubt.

We have already touched upon the question of the *fidelity* that necessarily accompanies poetic testimony as the poet's bearing witness. Therein, the poet acts as *guarantor* to our fidelity in making this affirmation. That faith is intimately connected to affirmation does not come as any surprise to us. An *assertion*, as I have defined this term, must appeal to external facts in order to confirm itself. Certainly, we must have faith in the scientist too but that faith is established by extrinsic authority. An assertion can only be judged "true" when it has been subjugated to external authority – the authority of, for example, a particular model of reality. Given that scientific practice expurgates the personal voice, it is necessary for an assertion's authoritative *bona fides* be established before the text can be judged legitimate.

With poetry, on the other hand, doubt and faith interact in a profound and momentous way. The reader is called upon to take personal responsibility for her or his reading. Whereas the *Is* and the *Is-not* of the poetic metaphor represent objective terms with little apparent personal implication, *faith* and *doubt* can only be assumed by a person in relation with that to which she

or he is faithful and, at the same time, doubtful. Only a personal *I* can have faith and doubt. Faith and doubt already form the rudiments of relation: a person's faith in... and doubt of...

When in faith, we access acceptance of that in which we have faith. Faith is a *turning-towards*, facing that in which faith is granted to us. But we can only turn towards something if, in the first place, we are *distanced* from it. Doubt serves this task of distancing us by setting that which we doubt at a distance. As we have noted, faith requires a primary distantiation of doubt in order to step towards the retreating mystery in which faith has its birth. Faith reveals *relation*, doubt brings *distance*. These two dimensions of a reader's involvement with poetry prove to be decisive. Doubt and faith participate in an essential dialectical dance that personalises and makes real the primary relation we are called upon to bear witness. They point up a vital dialectical synthesis of two antitheses essential to this relationship, dialectical in that both are present, neither abolished by the other.

Distance and relation

Martin Buber, in his landmark paper "Distance and Relation," speaks of the two movements that comprise the principle of human life. He identifies these as the "primal setting at a distance," and the "entering upon relation." The latter presupposes the former since we can only enter into relation *with* something when that something is set at a distance, or, "more precisely, has become an independent opposite."⁶ Buber situates the two-fold movement of distance and relation into the context of replacing the "unsteady conglomeration" in pure animal experience with a "unity which can be imagined or thought by him [the human] as existing for itself."⁷ It is in this sense," he says, "that a 'world' can properly be said to exist." It is, I suggest, also in this sense that poetry can properly be said to exist as existing for itself, for without that relation to a "world" set opposite, there would be no poetry. To paraphrase Buber, poetry

⁶ Martin Buber (1965b) "Distance and Relation" in *The Knowledge of Man*: 60.

⁷ I am far from convinced that an animal's experience in the world can necessarily be characterized by such an "unsteady conglomeration." However, as our own human experience with the world can easily collapse into such a state (e.g., How I am as I walk through a crowded city street), I will accept the description.

provides our human becoming in that situation: “Distance provides the human situation; relation provides man’s becoming in that situation.”⁸

According to Buber, distance and relation need not follow each other in chronological order, like a specific temporal succession. Relation does not need to be preceded by distance. Distance is already a relationship of sorts, if only it be a turning away. It is not possible, Buber argues, to conceive of an existence over against a world which is not also an *attitude* to it as a world.⁹ But, he says, “distance” and “relation” are not to be thought of as necessarily two aspects of the same event or process. There is no kind of parallelism whereby “setting at a distance” definitely brings about the “entering upon relation.” Rather, each brings about the presupposition of the other. When one appears nothing more is given than room for the other. Man can *set at a distance* without fully *coming into relation* with that which is set at a distance. Turning-away from that which is set at a distance by assigning it to forgetfulness barely achieves a glimmer of relation except that of ignoring it. Keeping the poem in the realm of *It*, without opening a relation with it, will maintain its distance, solidifying it into opacity. There are times when a poem seems opaque to the gaze. However, when I enter into relation, the setting at a distance has automatically been achieved. The two might stand in extreme tension with each other. Or in moments of *grace*, a profound correlation can arise within the tension between distance and relation, overcoming the apparent contrariness between them. It is this profound correlation which is, I believe, achieved when our relation with poetry reaches its full potential.

Gathering these two movements into a single figure, the reader affirms the poem with her or his sense of being, pointing into the poem’s *pointing-towards the other* opening a sense of *Thou* and bringing all interpretation and mystery to bear upon this one profound relation. Therein, poetic mystery reaches its fulfilment, not in the *ecstatic unity* of the mystic or enthusiast but in existential *dialogue* between reader and poem, poem and world, reader and world. The poet’s voice provides the space for dialogue to come into being. This does not reflect merely a

⁸ Martin Buber (1965b) “Distance and Relation”: 64.

⁹ Martin Buber (1965b) “Distance and Relation”: 62.

“dialogue” of meaning only, the way I used the word in earlier chapters, but a meeting of being a self (*I*) with the being of another (*Thou*).

The ever-present problematic engendering doubt sets being at a distance, thus becoming *a* being in exclusivity. Hence a poem sets the *other* at a distance. In this way, the poem steps forward as the poet’s integral voice in a reader’s relation with it. The poem is manifest there as a *work* for the reader in its integrity. This is what William Wimsatt called a “verbal icon.” Distantiation of *poem* from *other* makes room for *pointing-towards* the other. Simply put, the poem’s disengagement, its distance, and pointing-towards, its nascent relation, makes room for facing another as my *Thou*. That is, a relation is established between poem and other which is made possible by the poem’s establishment as an integral, exclusive voice in its own right. A poetic affirmation might thus be thought of as a *relation* in itself, unlike an *assertion* that binds its reader to definite definitive boundaries. Throughout a mystery’s “pointing-towards,” poetic affirmation, in which we have faith, is an arrow which accomplishes relation.

That relation is predicated upon a *relative breach* of the *Thou* from the poem. The poem, as a work of art, brings into being that affirmation essential to the life of humankind by setting itself (or having been set) apart from that which it affirms. However, such an apparent separation – its setting-apart – is integral to the dialogical movement in which each being steps forth. Poetry performs an *essential relation*, bringing reader, poem and *Thou* into being. That is, the poem performs the act of what Martin Buber calls the *Between*. Josiah Royce understood the idea of the *Between* in a very similar way:

But, however far we seem to grow remote from one another, and to be independent centres of life and of meaning, there remains a realm that [...] appears *between* us; that is, it is such that our sharp distinction from one another depends upon our distinguishing it from every Self.¹⁰

It has often been commented that the poem as a text stands in the eclipse of the poet and of the other towards which it points. While an eclipse does not eliminate or negate that which is

¹⁰ Josiah Royce (1959) *The World and the Individual: Vol. 2 Nature, Man and the Moral Order*: 176-7.

eclipsed, nevertheless it is obvious they are not *objectively present*. This is a primary mystery of poetry – some would say *paradox* of poetry. But having said this, once we enter into the *between* of the poem as relation, we are placed into relation with both poet and the other to which the poet points – the pointing which *is* the poem.

This brings us to another property of the act of “pointing-towards” the other. In no way does it *appropriate* the other within itself. We are not dealing with *representation*. The ambiguity of poetry has always been problematical for those who expect language to contain a representation of an aspect of the world. Poetry on the other hand, *points* as William Wimsatt understood, without *containing* the appearances of that to which it points towards as an *image*. On this point I have to disagree with Gaston Bachelard.¹¹ What we find, instead, is a *sense of being* of the other. That is a profound thought.

Distance makes room for relation. The attitude in the *pointing towards* the *Thou*, central to poetic mystery, is itself a mystery just like that which “makes strange” (“*ostranenie*” in Russian formalist Viktor Shklovski’s famous dictum) is itself strange.¹² The poem is thus an iconic object, an affirmation and a relation. An integral work of art, hermeneutically incomplete, is the affirmation of the *Thou* and, just as important, an affirmation of itself as indubitably true, for only a true affirmation can bring the reader’s *sense of being a being* into a reality to meet it. But as in all essential relations, we grasp the mystery before us through the mystery in ourselves:

In an essential relation [...] the barriers of individual being are in fact breached and a new phenomenon appears which can appear only in this way: one life opens to another—not steadily, but so to speak attaining its extreme reality only from point to point, yet also able to acquire a form in the continuity of life; the other becomes present not merely in the imagination or feeling, but in the depths of one’s substance, so that one experiences the mystery of the other being in the mystery of one’s own. The two participate in one another’s lives in very fact, not psychically, but ontically.¹³

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard (1969) *The Poetics of Space*: xii ff.

¹² Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis eds. (1965) *Russian formalist criticism: four essays*.

¹³ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 170.

I and the poetic Thou

In its ever-renewal, the *I* is said along with my affirmation. To affirm is always *I-affirm*, the point that allowed us to consider poetry in the light of Austin's concept of the performative. The *sense of being a being*, so necessary to the self, is called into play the moment of its affirmation. On the other hand, poetic mystery calls forth the mystery of the self. Hence the mystery of *the I* comes to be called forth along with the mystery of that which is affirmed. Heidegger glimpsed something like this in the poetry of Hölderlin, although he tended to only see there the ever-present problematic, the abyssal aspect of poetic mystery, as it pointed towards withdrawing being and not its essential ontological affirmation as a being in its exclusiveness and ground. The mystery of *the I* and that in which the self has no convenient bottom to strike, is filled with the sense of being an *I* precisely in its identity as felt being. Unless a fracturing explanation splits the self into zones of *being* and of *non-being* (the unconscious?), the latter remaining extant but unacknowledged, the self in its exclusivity is able to be *whole* precisely because it is a being in its exclusivity. This means that what is most mysterious in the self is not endlessly empty but, on the contrary, luminous to a form of knowing that cannot be spoken *except* through poetry and its metaphors, what Michael Polanyi came to call the "tacit dimension": that which we know but cannot talk *about*.¹⁴ Indeed, we are bound to use poetic metaphors in order to grant shape to this mystery of mysteries. We speak of "illumination" and "enlightenment." We speak of "understanding" and "inspiration." We speak of "energy" and "enchantment." These are all metaphors. Even as dead metaphors, still something of their poetic origin clings to them. Whenever a mystery arises before us, we seek to grasp it – "grasp" is another metaphor – through poetic metaphor. No other discourse has the reach to give presence to this luminous mystery at the heart of the self. It isn't possible to expunge poetic metaphor from our critical discourse without destroying the very core of discourse itself. We would be condemned to never speaking of self, never speak of us or our relationships with other beings. As

¹⁴Michael Polanyi (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*: 4.

a story-telling species, without access to poetic metaphor we would be unable to speak at all. Poetic metaphor and its mysteries inculcates the whole of our discourses whether we want to acknowledge this truth or not.

What is mysterious in the self should not be endlessly empty but luminous with a sense of being a being. Of course, this is not always the case. An objective, critical discourse can intercede between *I* and self, thereby eclipsing all possibility for disclosing being in this most intimate of arenas. Because his objective gaze couldn't penetrate these felt depths, Jean-Paul Sartre dismissed them as a certain "inwardness": "The *I*," he wrote, "is the producer of inwardness."¹⁵ But the *I*, according to Sartre, is also a product of a secondary consciousness – a *reflective* consciousness: a consciousness of a consciousness – and thus has little value in his particular version of existential phenomenology.¹⁶ Sartre reduced consciousness to a *nothingness* – equivalent to Buber's conception of *I* from the primary word *I-It* in which the *I* has "shrunk from substance and fullness to a functional point"¹⁷ – while he posits the *I* as an object without mystery:¹⁸ Neither room for a proper sense of being a being here, nor room for a *Thou* or for poetry.

One addresses the mystery of the other by reaching toward the sense of being that incorporates the mystery of one's personal self. In other words, bringing the whole self into relation with the other, calls our personal sense of being a being forth to grasp and intimate the mystery of the other. "The other," to repeat Martin Buber, "becomes present not merely in the imagination or feeling, but in the depths of one's substance, so that one experiences the mystery of the other being in the mystery of one's own."¹⁹ My sense of being a being mediates the being of the other affirmed in reading when taking my stand within the magic circle of poetic affirmation. That implies the poem's metaphors will only come to fulfilment when I am able to

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre (1957a) *The Transcendence of Ego*: 38.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre (1957a) *The Transcendence of Ego*: 38-42.

¹⁷ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 29.

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) *Being and Nothingness*: lx.

¹⁹ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 170.

step up to it in my mystery and sense of being which dwells within mystery, and make this poetic affirmation. In Buber's terminology, "speak" the poem, not merely as a verbal act, talking through the poem, as it were, but speaking it *in the very act of one's own being*, using what Marcel termed the *infinitive* rather than the *substantive* definition of "being",²⁰ and thus to assume the *pointing-towards* enacted in poetic metaphor. In poetry, therefore, I am pointed in the direction of the other and can thus hold the other before me, not as a *representation* of its otherness, which must always remain in the realm of *It*, but as a being towards whom I reach out towards in essential being. In this relation, all the aspects of poetry we have been able to disinter – meaning, incompleteness, the meaningful, mystery, enrichment, affirmation, testimony, bearing witness, pointing-towards, distance and relation – come to take their essential place with respect to one another within a single poetic relation.

The mystery in its negative aspect as our *doubt* withdraws, taking one step further away from us. That is, the *Is-not* reasserts itself on every level, in every explanation, in every interpretation. Accompanying the negative aspect of the mystery, however, the positive aspect of the mystery, the poetic affirmation, the *Is*, its *faith* also arises in every explanation, in every interpretation to balance and answer the seeds of doubt. When a true meeting comes about between *I* and another, that poetic affirmation accompanying the mystery is illuminated with a sense of being a being I recognize in the mystery that comes from my own knowing of what it is to be a being. No matter how far the metaphoric mystery withdraws, the mysterious sense of being a being, that ontological knowing which the reader brings to reading the poem, fulfils the task of stepping towards that which withdraws. "Withdrawal", in one sense, is "openness" in relation to a *sense of being a being*. That is, the withdrawing mystery is also ontological openness. Heidegger implies something very like this. Except I am saying the withdrawal-openness comes to be understood only when *the I* steps up to meet it and in meeting it, faces the other as a *Thou*. Clearly, when I bring my own sense of being a self – also making myself

²⁰ Gabriel Marcel (1973) *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*: 48.

present – that I can meet the other in her, his or its fullness with a sense of being a being. Hence, unlike Heidegger, I do not see the *I* somehow *overcome* by Being as in his famous concept of the *forgetfulness of Being*,²¹ ontologically, *but* instead being made *essential* in my own exclusiveness in order to meet the exclusiveness of the being of the other; that is, in Heidegger's terms, "ontically".²² The poem thus fulfils the *place* of Buber's conception of the *between*, creating the *space* in which the speaking of *I-Thou* is made possible. However, the poem does not *contain* the *Thou*, it is, rather, the *speaking* of *I-Thou*.

Just as the poetic metaphor's incompleteness brought us to the threshold of mystery, so mystery, enrichment and affirmation have brought us to the threshold of relation. Indeed, the affirmation that *is* the poem is the speaking of *I-Thou*. Dialogue, here, assumes a profound difference with mere spoken dialogue. Although a poem is spoken, it is "speaking" a relation ontologically, if you will. Whereas, hermeneutical incompleteness of a poem creates the opportunity for on-going interpretation that is a dialogue of sorts, it need not necessarily reach ontological dialogue. But granting the reader's sense of being a being in stepping up to the poem, the metaphoric mystery displays itself as an openness luminous with a sense of being which we can meet face to face. This goes a long way to explaining Empson's problem that one grasps the rich "beauty" of a poem before its meanings can be enumerated into separate, identifiable interpretations. All the interpretations, we can identify, are not ignored in dialogue but are swept up into it. We do not turn away from any other way of seeing the other.²³ We do not assign any act of interpretation to non-being.

The speaking of *Thou*, of *I-Thou*, brings forth the poem. Poetry is one of the primary ways in which the *between* in its authenticity steps into our lives. There are other ways, including the other arts, story and ritual, all emerging from our Palaeolithic past. The moment someone spoke poetically to another, our humanity was born.

²¹ Martin Heidegger (1962) *Being and Time*: 262

²² Martin Heidegger (1962) *Being and Time*: 32.

²³ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 7.

Style in resistance and grace

What happens when the reader confronts a poem for the first time? Let us assume the poem *does not* immediately deliver itself to the reader. First, she or he faces a piece of writing that appears opaque, its metaphors paradoxical and impenetrable, yet still redolent with promise. The metaphorical copula “is” conflicts directly with its literal *Is-not*. Many times have I heard the comment: “I don’t understand poetry.” For those readers, poetic *resistance* overcomes all possible *grace*. Somehow, grace has been placed beyond reach. During that moment of greatest resistance, the reader might not be ready to receive the poem’s grace? If I cannot “hear” the voice of the poet, how am I able to receive the poem stepping up to meet me? The barrier, however, might not lie wholly with the reader. Arcane speech is just that, arcane; a bad poem, simply bad. Even the easiest poetry might not yield its secrets without difficulty. Moreover, there are also questions of what Saussure dubbed the *idiolect*. That is, the idiomatic language of a poet (for which biography and even autobiography can only offer partial explanation), also sets up resistance to interpretation, adding to the distantiation of the work.

The *difficulty* of the language solidifies distance of the poem. *Resistance*, similar to the doubt within the poetic relation, places the poem itself opposite the reader thus fulfilling the essential first movement implicit in relation. That means the hermeneutical resistance of the poem is essential to the formation of a positive *relation* with that work, fostering room for encounter. If the work were totally transparent to our understanding, no encounter with the poem would be possible because it would transfer the reader through to something else, a displacement to which critical discourse aspires. Transparency like this remains the measure of its invisibility. Familiarity also breeds invisibility. But hermeneutical resistance brings the poem out into the open, rendering it concrete and visible. It is no mere window to the world. Even were the reader to gain immediate access to the mystery and the relation of the poem, we would not expect she or he merely beholds some aspect of the world. “Aspect” here already confirms a *perspective* in the realm of *appearances* that is often taken to represent the world. It is significant that poetry

“makes strange” (*ostranenie*),²⁴ in Viktor Shklovski’s memorable phrase, an act in contradistinction to invisibility. The poem “makes strange” because it is itself made strange.

However, a relation need not necessarily follow from initial resistance. As Martin Buber says, only *room* is made for relation in distantiation. Many readers do not get past a poem’s resistance, even should they be willing. What is required is more than just an act of the will; it also requires an *act of grace*. For me to be called to a poem’s primary relation – that is, for the reader to be called on to speak the poetic *I-Thou* – I also need the poem to “speak” to me. The engagement with a poem, when it happens, is truly dialogical, for the opportunity brings the *Thou*, spoken by the poem, into ontological presence for the reader. Grace answers resistance in providing an opening to the poem, inviting the reader to engage with the poem. But it only brings us to the threshold of engagement.

Grace relies on resistance, as relation relies on distance and faith relies on doubt. Susan Sontag discerns in a poem’s *style* its emergence as a being in its own right: “A work of art is not only about something; it is something. Art is a thing *in* the world, not just a text or commentary *on* the world.”²⁵ The reader becomes fully a reader at the moment of engagement by stepping up to meet an *embodiment* with that *sense of being a being* – a sense of what it means to be an embodied being – which enables the unfolding of relation. But style can only be a *style* as such from the moment when relation comes to be imminent, a possibility. That is why style is the face a work turns towards its reader as an act of *grace*, an act of *calling upon*. Susan Sontag says that engagement with the work is “something like an excitation, a phenomenon of commitment, judgment in a state of thrall or captivation. Which is to say that the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgment) in itself.”²⁶

²⁴ Terence Hawkes (1977) *Structuralism and Semiotics*: 62-3.

²⁵ Susan Sontag (1987) *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*: 21.

²⁶ Susan Sontag (1987) *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*: 22.

The poem stands before us as a unique presence questioning and questioned by the reader. One should understand ‘style’ existentially as announcing the ontological dimensions in which the encounter is to be made. That too is a form of grace. Whenever hermeneutical resistance is come upon, it is not to a “background” provided by the biography of the poet, to which we should appeal but always *to the poem itself* and the meeting with the other it makes possible. Poetic resistance, on the other hand, does not necessarily create an opaque curtain. It brings towards us the first intimation of a call for greater engagement, greater involvement and greater deliberation.

The grace of the poem takes the form of a fundamental gift for her or him who seeks. In the words of Existential theologian John Macquarrie,

[H]is *quest* for the sense of existence is met by the gift of a sense for existence. He experiences this initiative from beyond himself in various ways. In so far as it supports and strengthens his existence and helps to overcome its fragmentariness and impotence, he calls the gift that comes to him “grace.”²⁷

Now the word “grace” is the same conception whether in a theological context or in the context of poetry. Only that which grants grace differs. As well to remember for those who take the view that “beauty is [solely] in the eye of the beholder,” and therefore thought to be purely “subjective”, that they are mistaking precisely this dimension of grace that “takes the initiative and works in the very being of man, not indeed to take away his responsibility but to enable him to fulfil the demands which he accepts.”²⁸ The “eye of the beholder” view derives from imposing a subject-object metaphysic onto an area to which it does not apply. I do not wish to remove John Macquarrie’s idea of God’s grace entirely from its proper place in his theology but merely to explain the nature of grace as the face the poem turns towards its reader and the appeal by the poem to that *sense of being a being* unique to each of us that can make the poem live or fail to live, as the case may be. Commenting upon Macquarrie, Eugene Long explains:

²⁷ John Macquarrie (1977) *Principles of Christian Theology*: 84

²⁸ John Macquarrie (1977) *Principles of Christian Theology*: 317

For Macquarrie, grace is understood in the context of seeking to make sense of and bring order to human existence in its being in the world. “Authentic existence” is the term used to designate this ordered self. In the English translation of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* [which Macquarrie translated], the term *eigentlich* is translated as “authentic” and means “ownness” or “mineness.” Macquarrie describes authentic selfhood, however, as possible only within a community of selves in which the polarities of community and individuality are held in tension.²⁹

Similarly, theologian Paul Tillich understands “grace” as that which overcomes our human estrangement.³⁰ Rather than underlining what this means in an absolute sense – that is, absolute estrangement can only be overcome by God’s grace according to both Tillich and Macquarrie – I wish to highlight *relative* estrangement or, more rightly, *disengagement*, as a product of that relative breach, that resistance and its distantiation addressed by a poem’s grace.

The *style* of the poem is not just an aesthetic value of structure and appearance, as is commonly supposed, but properly described in its existential value as *the call through grace for undertaking a relation*. Thus, we are able to characterize *style* as the accomplishment of a poem’s *resistance*, on the one hand, and the presence of a face turned towards the reader as *grace* in overcoming disengagement, on the other. Style has this dual character: That which distantiates also engages. Engagement and its negative, disengagement, belong to a single figure, just like the paradox in a poetic metaphor’s literary *Is* and literal *Is-not*, along with faith and doubt, also belonging to a single figure; a figure within which distance (disengagement) and relation (engagement) are intimately entangled throughout.

The ever-present problematic of metaphor produces a clear resistance to engagement, thereby creating distance between reader and poem. Yet the face turned towards us also calls upon us to be present in order to be ready for relation. Poetic style is thus identified with distantiating resistance and vocational grace. Poetic truth is, therefore, not objective, critical truth but relational: True in the sense of the carpenter’s line; not geometrically true but true according

²⁹ Eugene Thomas Long (1985) *Existence, Being and God*: 26

³⁰ Paul Tillich (1957b) *Systematic Theology*. Vol. II: 55.

to the grain of the timber and form of the cabinet. Were I to seek critical, objective knowledge from, say, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” I would quickly lose myself – literally “lose myself” – in distinguishing fantasy from fact, thereby overlooking the ballad’s true curve of suffering.

The epistemological value of poetry lies in its existential value of true relation. What we learn from poetry is not *what to know* – truth *about* knowledge – for which we properly turn to science and its allies, but the truth in its relation: *truth in the sense of being a being in relation with other being* – pointing *true* – “true” as an adjective, as in “faithful”, and “true” as a transitive verb. Critical knowledge defers being to its descriptive and explanatory taxonomies and makes its assertions from the heart of such a deference. Poetic truth, on the other hand, recognizes the relation with the being in her, his or its own right as my *Thou*. Critical truth effaces the personal in favour of its essential objectivity by removing the non-cognitive aspects of the mental landscape in favour of its cognitive functions. Poetic truth brings the personal self forward, not inside a containing subjectivity but as a *person* in dialogue. Therein, an implicit ethical manoeuvre is enacted in *true* and, therefore, *right* relation. Speaking *I-Thou* is a primary ethical act, doing justice to the relation with the being of the other as existentially a being, valued and valorised, for itself and for us. We can start with the importance of Aristotelian deliberation, as described in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, with respect to the resistance and grace that sets the poem before us and calls on us to relate with it. But we need also to encompass the poem in community before a comprehensive poetic ethics can be entered into. The following section, therefore, only brings us to the threshold of such an ethics.

Resistance and deliberation

One may begin to grasp something of an ethical manoeuvre through poetic resistance, by the detachment and engagement required for a reader’s judgment to be enacted. The assertion of an absolute truth (were there such a thing) allows no room for the personal self. But poetry’s indeterminacy opens the way for just such a stepping-forth: Its ambiguity is the prime motivator

for the need to judge for oneself. Even on this level of the dialectic – its incompleteness – an ethical value is already present. Let us characterize it thus:

The act of deliberation on the ambiguous figure (e.g., style as resistance and grace,) is the very deliberation essential to Aristotelian virtue ethics. Aristotle stated that “deliberation is out of place when the subject of it is some branch of art or science that has been worked out in detail and is complete in its own limits.”³¹ The ambiguous figure relies upon the involvement of personal understanding³² in order to be fulfilled. Aristotle said: “Deliberation [...] is concerned with things which, while in general following certain definite lines, have no predictable issues, or result of which cannot be clearly stated, or in which, when important decisions have to be made, we take others into our counsels, distrusting our own ability to settle the point.”³³

Aristotelian philosopher Martha Nussbaum agrees with this view when she says the “literary text is seen as the occasion for a complex activity of searching and understanding on the part of the reader.”³⁴ Taking responsibility for one’s own response involves the act of making the response one’s own. Aristotle also said:

Now the thing we deliberate about and the thing we choose are one and the same. The only difference is that, when a thing is chosen, it is already set apart, inasmuch as it has been already selected as a result of the deliberation. We all stop asking how we are going to act when we have traced the origin of action back to ourselves, that is to the ruling or rational part of ourselves, for that it is which makes deliberate choice.³⁵

Reading with this level of commitment is no mere extension of passive reading. Within the resistance which sets up the *manner* of engaging with the poem, the possibilities of relation are established. An opaque work places itself at a solidified distance that remains to be bridged. I note my uncomfortable relation with James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* where the complex density of the literary style still denies me access. The work establishes its ontic dimensions for which

³¹ Aristotle (1911) *Nicomachean Ethics*: III, 3.

³² Aristotle (1911) *Nicomachean Ethics*: VI, 10.

³³ Aristotle (1911) *Nicomachean Ethics*: III, 3.

³⁴ Martha Nussbaum (1990) *Love’s Knowledge*: 6.

³⁵ Aristotle (1911) *Nicomachean Ethics*: III, 3.

the form is the vital expression. I recognize that Joyce's last major work is meant as the product of an inebriate's flow of words and imagery, or the voice of the unconscious, spoken in an Irish accent expressing the rich history of Ireland (so I'm told). Unfortunately, that explanation helps little in my reading the work. Yet it implies the significant connection between an ambiguous form's distantiation and the room it grants for relation. That a sense of being a being is presented "as something" calling to the reader's own sense of being a being and setting up room for definite relation. If we gain access to the work, the style has not merely an intimate connection to the relation but, in itself, evokes meaning which reflects upon, and reflects, the relation. The style, encompassing its incompleteness, mystery and relation, acts in concert to be, as Martha Nussbaum says, "expressive of a certain form of life."³⁶

I have established the distance of the work as a product of its inherent resistance. But it is its grace, its ability within the tensions of style to call forth the subtleties of existence and to open them in an existential manner, that allows the reader proper deliberation on being. That deliberation is not only the action of interpretation – the poem means *this* or means *that* – it is the placement of the self in relation with the work and the truth of its relation. This is the possibility of establishing oneself and taking responsibility for one's own response, *in* one's own response.

Reading raises the potential for learning to be. This is the implicit possibility of the "as something" expounded by Martha Nussbaum. We are not placed into a situation of absolute deferral as the postmodernists would have it, where being is cast eternally away from itself. Instead, the relation inherent in the work of art has this significance: that in relation *to it* we are placed in relation *with* a focus of being. The situation of a poem is "real" in this sense – the Ancient Mariner is *real*, so too Odysseus, Polyphemos and Circe (Kirke). We have entered upon a resistance which establishes its own being, and an act of grace that opens and unfolds in the possibility of an ethical sensibility in deliberation which determines *who* the reader is. To repeat Martin Buber: "Distance provides the human situation; relation provides man's becoming in that

³⁶ Martha Nussbaum (1990) *Love's Knowledge*: 6.

situation.”³⁷ Ethics begins precisely here. But, of course, it does not end here. We will have to explore the link of poetry with community before, in the conclusion, undertaking an outline of a more comprehensive poetic ethics. Central to this will be *the call* at the heart of the poem, which is the poem, projecting through the dialectical levels from the discovery of poetic incompleteness to the enlargement of a poetic community.

Poetic vocation

The source of the poetic call that is the poem has its ground in the speaking forth of the poem by the poet in a vocational act. In an apparent reversal of the actual situation, the argument has processed dialectically from the incompleteness of poetic meaning, through its mystery that makes meaning meaningful, to the relation with the world, each description encompassing and transcending those before, each description richer in its explanatory possibilities. That reflects the situation of the reader. But if we consider how a poem arises for the poet, the real situation of the poem reverses this order: the poet in relation with [the world] speaks the poem into being, bodying it forth. Throughout this essay, I largely assume the situation of the reader, rather than the position of the poet. Yet it is impossible to detach the poet from the poem, as we have already argued, although the poet comes to be eclipsed by the very presence of the poem as a concrete work. Moreover, a poem might have a life in history far exceeding the lifetime of its creator. One needs only to consider the works of Homer, of Lao Tzu or Rumi, and the works of Dante, Hildegard or Shakespeare to witness the extent to which the life of a work far exceeds that of its creator. How it acquired this power to bring history to itself and project the presence of the poet into epochs utterly different from the world in which it was created, remains a related question but not our primary concern. However, it might be partly addressed by grasping the ontological dialogue in which a poet creates a poem.

Let us proceed in this daunting task by asking with Martin Heidegger the question: “What calls forth thinking?” Heidegger argued that this question is incorporated in the even more

³⁷Martin Buber (1965b) *The Knowledge of Man*: 64.

fundamental question “What is called thinking?” And also embedded in this is the direct question: “What calls on us to think?” The “what” and its “calling” arise with each question. This should appear familiar to us because it reflects exactly the situation of poetic mystery. The relevance for us here is that the question “What is poetry?” has implied questions that begin to become apparent when we ask: “What is called poetry?” And with it: “What calls on us to write poetry?” Such implied questions arise from the ground for which poetry is the direct expression. The very fact of *writing poetry* raises the question of: “What called on the poet to write poetry?” It is intrinsic to the fact of that writing. Mystery, unlike its objective counterpart, problem, is inclusive because it *reverberates*, as Gaston Bachelard would have it, on the many layers of being. “In this reverberation, the poetic image will have a sonority of being.”³⁸ It stays a mystery, wherever and however we deliberate on it and throughout the many layers of our being.

“What calls on the poet to write?” *The poet is* in the text of the question but, Heidegger argued, the move from asking such a question as “What is called thinking?” to “What calls forth thinking?” is no mere sleight of hand. He argued that “to call” also contains “to call forth” and that it paraphrases the verbs “invite,” “demand,” “instruct,” and “direct”:

“To call,” in short, means “to command,” provided we hear this word, too, in its native, telling sense. For “to command” basically means, not to give commands and orders, but to commend, entrust, give into safe-keeping, keep safely. To call means: to call into arrival and presence; to address commendingly.³⁹

The definition most applied to “to call” is that of attaching a name, an appellation to what we are naming: Adam named the animals that God paraded before him. Naming is a profoundly ancient, mythic act that arose in human consciousness well before critical assertions of explanation and definition. But simply to say “to call” entails “to name,” like all common meanings of an ordinary sense, it usurps the place of language as properly inhabited.⁴⁰

“Philology,” complains George Steiner, “places words in a context of older or related words, not

³⁸ Gaston Bachelard (1969) *The Poetics of Space*: xii.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 118. Cf. Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 9-10.

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 119.

in that of moral purpose and conduct. It gives to language formality, not form.”⁴¹ Heidegger might look for the “rare” meaning, but his explanation draws away from dictionary terminology because he is always relating words to their characteristic ontological reality as the dwelling place of being. Heidegger said elsewhere, in admiration of Friedrich Hölderlin:

We – mankind – are a conversation. The being of men is founded in language. But this only becomes actual in *conversation*. Nevertheless the latter is not merely a manner in which language is put into effect, rather it is only as conversation that language is essential. What we usually mean by language, namely, a stock of words and syntactical rules, is only a threshold of language.⁴²

Philology provokes sense where being once dwelt. The philological process that both George Steiner and Martin Heidegger attacked is related to the appropriation by the processes of “familiarization” evident in Barthesian “myth”.⁴³ However, the word will not be *appropriated* when its underlying being is sought, although the current definition of the word cannot be pushed aside by the rare one. Rather, we see in the common term, not an end in itself as an explanation, but the inference of the meaning of the rare term: “to call” in the sense of “to name” applies a name to things in which the name serves to *call upon* that which is named to present itself; *to call it up, to call it forth*. Heidegger wrote: “In any case, all naming and all being named is the familiar “to call” only because naming itself consists by nature in the real calling, in the call to come, in a commending and a command.”⁴⁴

Something like this sense of “to call [up]” as calling something forth is perhaps most obvious in religious ritual: “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Heidegger wrote in his essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”:

Since we have been a conversation – man has learnt much and named many of the heavenly ones. Since language really became actual as conversation, the gods have acquired names and a world has appeared. But again it should be noticed:

⁴¹ George Steiner (1969) *Language and Silence*: 139.

⁴² Martin Heidegger (1949) “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” in Heidegger, Martin. (1949) *Existence and Being*: 277.

⁴³ Roland Barthes (1972) “Myth today” in Barthes, Roland (1972) *Mythologies*.

⁴⁴ Martin Heidegger (1968) *What is Called Thinking?*: 120.

the presence of the gods and the appearance of the world are not merely a consequence of the actualisation of language, they are contemporaneous with it. And this to the extent that precisely in the naming of the gods, and in the transmutation of the world into word, that the real conversation, which we ourselves are, consists.⁴⁵

“Calling forth”: a name calls forth. “To think”: To think about, to think it; “To write”: to write it. Yet while thinking may be able to posit itself in the assertion thinking *about*, poetry collapses the moment the poet writes *about*: we cannot affirm-*about*. There is no [critically] discursive poetry, no [critically] discursive affirmation, only [critical] discourse that has its origin in poetry. Poetry is not removed, even by a single step, from the voice of the poet, nor from the primary relation of the poem. Thus, poetry takes us even beyond thinking because the source of naming itself, calling forth, is poetry. And in calling forth the poet is called upon to write. Poetry from the poet’s point of view is best characterized as a creative *vocation* – rather than as a creative *process*. Naming as a *calling* and *calling forth* is implied in “vocation” that has the same Latin root of *vocare* (“to call”) as “invocation” and “evocation,” drawing in the sense of a response and a responsibility to something beyond the self. Such *calling* is no mere application of a word to an already existent thing. Rather, it must be understood in the manner of Buber’s “primary word” as that which is “spoken by the whole being”⁴⁶ and in the manner of Heidegger’s calling as a *calling forth*.

“What calls to be written by the poet?” What calls the poet forth to write? In the proper sense, the poet is called forth to be a poet. “The poet is called forth to write,” is, in the proper sense, *poetic vocation*. The poet’s being is addressed. What calls forth is that which calls on the poet to be written, asks to be written and asks *to be*, to be called forth and to be bodied forth. Essentially the poet is called forth to call forth. Writing poetry, to write a poem, is to call forth. What is called forth but: *To call forth* that *which calls to be called forth*? These are not just word games, they reveal the true extent of the mystery: that *the origin of being is in the meeting with*

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger (1949) “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”: 279

⁴⁶ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 7.

other being, the basis for the moral purpose and conduct implied by the indwelling word. The poet's creative vocation should thus be characterized:

The poet is called forth to call forth that which calls to be called forth.

The trace of this primary relation is found in the poem which speaks and affirms this calling. Heidegger reached the same conclusion in words that bear a striking similarity to those of Martin Buber:

This naming does not consist merely in something already known being supplied with a name; it is rather that when the poet speaks the essential word, the existent is by this naming nominated as what it is. So it becomes known *as* existent. Poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word.⁴⁷

But it is not simply that a being is spoken, the speaking of the poem reflects on the poet who speaks for only the poet, *this* poet, could speak in this way and write this poem. This relation is, like all true relation, two-way like Jacob's ladder, upon which angels travelling in both directions forge communication between heaven and earth. The poet is illuminated as she or he illuminates; the poet is enlightened as she or he enlightens; the poet is spoken as she or he speaks; the poet is revealed as she or he reveals.

Vocation becomes through the calling to communion with other being, a resonant vocation from which even the objectivity intrinsic to scientific assertion might derive its personality and purpose. It is notable how reticent Gabriel Marcel is in "naming" that which calls forth.⁴⁸ Much more forthcoming, Martin Buber refers, with respect to art, to the "form" that "desires to be made through [the artist] into a work."⁴⁹ Nor can this form be "experienced." Buber's idiosyncratic use of the word "experience" in his formative work *I and Thou* relies upon its assumption of the *It*: One can only *experience* that which has been reified into objects. Of the form thus coming into being, Buber wrote:

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger (1949) "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry": 281.

⁴⁸ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 23.

⁴⁹ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 10.

I can neither experience nor describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth. And yet I behold it, splendid in the radiance of what confronts me, clearer than all the clearness of the world which is experienced. I do not behold it as a thing among “inner” things nor as an image of my “fancy,” but as that which exists in the present. If test is made of its objectivity the form is certainly not “there.” Yet what is actually so much present as it is? And the relation in which I stand to it is real, for it affects me, as I affect it.⁵⁰

It is this underlying being that is creative. But it is more than just a question of creating some poetic product (as if there were merely a production line for poetry) for the calling reflexively brings into being the poet. The ego, the *me*, the self “reduced to merely functional activity”⁵¹ in the realm of *It* is sent spinning into an infinite regress by the deflection of a critical taxonomy; the *I* of *It* recedes before that which it views. When the ego regards itself, it reveals, and has revealed to it, a *speculum ad infinitum*, a mirror of itself disappearing into infinity as an absolute, cosmological narcissism. However, when the poet’s being is *called forth to call forth*, to create, to bring into being, the origin of being, created being, calls the poet forth into being. The poet’s *calling forth* is the origin of what and who she or he is. In poetic creation being emerges, being-with-being, and this vocational origin is the creative origin of the poem. The origin of the poetic voice is in the personal relation of the poet who speaks with and for the world in a fundamental communion.

From a *critical* point of view – vocation itself becoming divided – the being which calls forth to be called forth, i.e. the being which calls forth to be written, Buber’s “form,” seems to exist in some way *prior* to being called forth. Therefore, in this view, the poet merely *discovers* that which has always been. But while this *seems* to be true *because* all things *must* have an apparent cause, *a priori*, I rebel against its implication that being lies separate from the poet, the creator, who cannot, therefore, be a creator, merely the passive container of perceptions; i.e. the poet does not create this being but merely perceives it. No, the delineations of critical objectivity, the lines that sever and fragment – lines that separate one element from another, *before* from

⁵⁰ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 10.

⁵¹ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 23.

after, call from caller, map from territory – are transcended by poetic being and its mystery which also transcends critical objectivity's assertions.

In a very real sense, the call, this vocation, is a *unity*. I recall here Gabriel Marcel's appeal to "ingathering" or "recollection"⁵² The poet is called forth to call forth that which calls to be called forth: *this is all **one** call*. The apparent separation of vocation into many calls is to split vocation into a concatenation of partial characteristics. Poetic creativity is *to be a poet in the calling*, fundamentally dialogical and centred in the mystery of *relation*, for relation like this is a "communion." Even that word can be taken the wrong way, especially in its mystical sense of achieving oneness with God, destroying the self altogether. But "communion" means the union with the *other* such that the *other* and *I* are brought through our mutual presence into being as exclusive beings, in itself a profound paradox always beyond the categories of critical discourse to fully encompass. "Communion" is paradoxical in the sense that it houses a union in the *between* but extends beyond this union into a dialogue between two as a transcendent duality: *comm*-union, the dialogue between an *I* and a *Thou*. The word "communion" thus transcends the basic physical structure of a straightforward union towards an affirmation of the beings so-affirmed in communion; affirmed in the union of the call. Heidegger said:

The ability to speak and the ability to hear are equally fundamental. We are a conversation – and that means: we can hear from one another. We are a conversation, that always means at the same time: we are a *single* conversation. But the unity of a conversation consists in the fact that in the essential word there is always manifest that one and the same thing on which we agree, and on the basis of which we are united and so are essentially ourselves. Conversation and its unity support our existence.⁵³

From *outside* a mystery, when specifically viewed critically by an observer, mystery appears opaque, obscure as if "through a glass darkly," in St. Paul's memorable phrase. When a poet holds the word and its meaning "in her or his head" as it were, she or he enters the fullness

⁵² Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 24.

⁵³ Martin Heidegger (1949) "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry": 278.

of the poetry in all its manifestations, a deep ontological connection between them which appears opaque to the observer who has no access to that underlying unity. The mystery is entered and fulfilled because it is *lived* by the poet as she or he *is* rather than what she or he *does*. Therefore, the poet cannot explain, even to her or himself, how the poem is one by its deep underlying ontology. To the observer the situation is opaque; to the poet it is transparent and ineffable. And for the reader who is no longer an outside observer, the poem also opens as the bearing witness of the poet as a person to a call that also exerts its calling on the reader.

Creative poetic vocation is itself a mystery. How can so many “calls” be a single *call*? Only when filled with being and lived, thus becoming one. When seen as many, as when observed from the outside, it remains obscure, a concatenation of “synthesized” fragments, as when, for instance, one searches for the *sources* of the creative product, in the manner of John Livingston Lowes and Werner W. Beyer. Being a unity, creative vocation contains no distinction between object/objective and subject/subjective. It no doubt has subjective and objective consequences which are the manifest facets of a single ontological unity after the fact. Each aspect can never be fully separated in reality without sitting on the cusp of betraying what is vital within it. The question “Where did the poem come from?” is unanswerable because the vocational call, which is lived, will not yield a resolution, the mystery remains ineffable. All our explanations ride the back of poetic metaphor.

The *question* – the calling forth to be called forth – and the *response* – the calling forth of that which calls forth – are not separated by a line like that forged between a problem and its solution, but one with one another. The question containing its response, the question in the response, and the response in the question, is *by definition a mystery*. Thus the poet is questioned and responds, calling forth that which calls to be called forth, *the poet and the poem together form the mysterious bond of poetic creation*. The poet is not the poem, yet we can never wholly separate them, one from the other. Poetry, which is “vitally metaphorical,” as Shelley told us,⁵⁴ is

⁵⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley (1911) “A Defence of Poetry”: 7.

itself a metaphor. Poetry extends into the very paradox of communion because *the poet affirms as she or he is confirmed*: the union is itself transcended. Both the poet and the poem come into being in their exclusivity. So too, the reader is called forth by the poem to affirm its truth. That is poetic grace.

Poetic truth

A poem's truth will never be the same kind of truth as scientific assertion or critical discourse. That is neither its purpose nor its existential attitude. Nor will it be an explanatory truth. A poem's truth will be the truth of an affirmation in as true a manner of its pointing beyond itself towards the being of the other, in itself a mystery, like the archer aims true. A poem's truth is profoundly relational.

I originally intended to insert a pithy quotation from Eugen Herrigel's famous *Zen and the Art of Archery* to illustrate the archery simile's pertinence to the truth of poetry. But reading this spiritual classic made me realize I mustn't be so glib in my efforts to explain poetry. Neither poetry nor Zen archery deserves such a cavalier approach to explanation, for the glib quotation would be a great disservice to both these essential arts. I stand chastened before the warning from the masters who say in the most concrete terms:

Anyone who subscribes to this art to-day, therefore, will gain from its historical development the undeniable advantage of not being tempted to obscure his understanding of the 'Great Doctrine' by practical aims—even though he hides them from himself—and to make it perhaps altogether impossible. For access to the art—and the master archers of all times are agreed in this—is only granted to those who are 'pure' in heart, untroubled by subsidiary aims.⁵⁵

Another simile I have already used is that of likening poetic truth to a carpenter's working of the timber in a line that is true. This less obvious version of truth – less obvious than the truth *contained* within a scientific assertion – is more amorphous and much more difficult to pin down: Yet how much more powerful in its personal significance? The reader points in grasping this affirmation, as the poet pointed in her or his original creative vocation. This truth

⁵⁵ Eugen Herrigel (1953) *Zen in the Art of Archery*: 15-16.

has been situated within the enactment of ontological pointing: an “attitude”, as Buber conceived of his Primary Words, gathers content to it as the reader interprets and brings his or her knowing into that reading. But it is not specifically its meaning-content that requires testing against reality. Inherently personal, no two people will entirely agree upon the meaning of a poem. What is significant is the location of the person to that meaning, making it meaningful through drawing-towards the mystery thus revealed – and towards which each meaning also points. The truth of poetry is not dependent upon containing reality but, on the other hand, in acknowledging the relation of person with world: To situate the self in a community of being.

Poetry should not to be garnered in terms of its propositions, for which it most likely will appear flawed, nonsensical and, indeed, absurd. Poetry, we must reiterate, clearly won’t be the basis for good science, no matter how much it inspires the scientist. We cannot escape the *Is-not* that attends poetry’s metaphors. Because truth cannot be a ragbag of meanings accompanied by their antitheses, the truth of poetry must lie elsewhere than within its propositions – something that takes into account the contradictions of poetic metaphor, transcending them yet, at the same time, remaining in touch with the concrete presence of the whole poem. Poetic affirmation does not yield a propositional calculus, no matter how hard we pretend such a calculus might exist. A propositional assertion will always be something that requires testing. A so-called “proposition” that cannot be tested is not a proposition. Testability remains central to propositional functionality and must continue to do so, as is right and proper. Science is the great work of modern human endeavour. It is based upon the fact of testing all its propositions. But a significant limitation of science is its confinement to the functional. It is this very functionality that is transcended by the poem. Gabriel Marcel wrote:

Life in a world centred on function is liable to despair because in reality this world is *empty*, it rings hollow; and if it resists this temptation it is only to the extent that there come into play from within it and in its favour certain hidden forces which are beyond its power to conceive or to recognize.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “On the Ontological Mystery”: 12.

Yet poetry, and indeed all of art, does not deny the functional or else how should it come into being as a concrete presence? Therein lies the tension that typifies the ongoing relation of art as a whole: the functional nature of the work of art as a physical presence (whether, for example, the poem *rhymes* or has a certain *rhythm* or *tone*, uses *metaphor* extensively or opts for softer comparisons in *simile*) yet, at the same time, transcends that presence upon which it utterly depends. Poetry arises from the ground of function itself in terms of its manifest presence in the world, yet it aspires to the transcendent realm of being (which is intrinsically *attitudinal*), to a community, the topic of the next theory chapter. Thus poetic truth is not to be confined to the functionality of an assertion as it first appears, but to this transcendent realm of being: being as a pointing-towards and relationally with respect to the being towards which it points.

We won't find the truth of a poem within the poem alone but in the steadfastness of its aim and the situation in which it is embedded, gathering meaning to itself without being imprisoned by meaning; a situation that has caused great consternation amongst the philosophers from Plato onwards. Their distrust of poetry is legion. Philosophy needs to pin down and grasp meaning in an act of qualification and validation. Poetry, however, cannot be pinned down without destroying something vital within it. And like those butterflies that fill museum cabinets, if it is pinned down poetry too succumbs. The truth of poetry will never be validated in this way. Those narrow interpretations of *The Bible*, for example, of the long poem *Job*, read as if this poem were some objective historical event, denying what is most precious in the book: the way of being in the face of cruel injustice and the arbitrary functions of fate. It is Job's comforters who, in pleading for a functionalistic theology, lose the way of being. Theirs is not a poetic faith. They have not heard the voice of doubt that enables reaching out towards the mystery. In another way equally damaging, the great long lyrical ballad by Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the seeker of sources, for which Coleridge has been particularly prone, fragments the poem into a long catenation of simulacra, ignoring the way of being that, like *Job*, is suffering, the curve of which structures the poem. Lose sight of that, in the midst of a plethora of image fragments and that which is meaningful in the poem is totally negated. The truth of the poem dies

within either a fragmenting study of details or an over-arching dogma that ignores the human quality, bodied forth by the poet, of pointing into the heart of being and the mystery of what it is to be a being.

In the poem cycle “Around Costessey,” Francis Webb opens a way to a relation with the landscape of Norfolk and those whose lives were played out in the turmoil of its history. The poetry follows the meanderings of the poet through the countryside, beside significant landmarks that spoke to the poet of people whose lives were lived in connection there: their tragedies and joys, their dramas and creativity, the martyrs and the artists; the domination of foreign powers and subsequent depopulation of the land; the religious struggles and the depictions of its pastoral beauties. Webb’s poetry sings the spiritual history of the land into being, calling it forth from the dusty pages of historical works and tourist pamphlets, and granting us a right relation with them, rather than that of the position of a spectator. This will copiously illustrate the remarks of this chapter but will also prepare us for the following chapter, in which we attend to the possibility of community that lies intrinsic to poetry.

Case Study Chapter V

Around Costessey

Consisting of ten poems, the sequence titled “Around Costessey” is set in the country surrounding the Norfolk village of Costessey (pronounced “Cosy”), about 5 miles northwest from Norwich on the Wensum River. Covering about 1000 years of historic individuals from Harold at Hastings to Anton Bruckner, whose symphonies had long inspired the poet; the poem cycle was written not according to a conventional linear development but according to a reflection upon the landscape as the poet wanders through it, reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782). Each era holds the imprint of specific spiritual resonance rather than accomplishing a conventional history of causation in action and reaction. Webb invites us to meditate on the depth of our relationship with landscape, wherever we are. According to Bill Ashcroft, the poetic cycle is a “metaphor of an inner space in which the different subjects of the individual poems provide various existential loci for a similar process of exploration and discovery [as in Webb’s explorer poems].”¹ Neither is there systematic or instrumental attachment to the land. Instead, we capture in an inconsistent series of set-pieces spiritual truths marking the poet within, but also set apart from, the landscape. Ashcroft invokes Derrida’s concept of “bricolage” – “an adaptive and fragmentary accretion rather than a planned construction”² – to account for this apparent inconsistency, stressing the incompleteness of experience as an on-going, transitional process, shifting locale, the act always defining its own meaning. Self-recursively, the poems seem to share little in common with each other. They grasp the landscape and serve as locations for metaphors examining both the being of place and the being of the self standing over against that landscape, making them meaningful in the relation that reflects the Between.

Andrew Lynch in his study of “Around Costessey” notes the limited extent to which Webb was exposed to the broader English landscape such that it never became habitual but

¹W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 157.

²W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 158.

always remained strange for him.³ Lynch claims that, on the contrary, traces of the poet's exile and isolation in the poems – for most of his time in Norfolk, Webb was incarcerated in mental hospitals – bears comparison with the explorer poems which confront the bitterness of existential desolation. Walking from the Rice Hospital at Drayton every Sunday to attend mass at St. Walstan's church in the historic Catholic enclave of Costessey, Webb was able to note the interplay of his religious faith upon the landscape around yet, at the same time, never fully belonging because his Catholic faith had its roots in Ireland. Because of his identity as a Catholic Australian marked by the history of brutality to Catholicism and its institutions in England, Webb would always be the perpetual stranger in a strange land.⁴ Through the relationship which marks the conjunction of the poet walking through the landscape with his distantiation standing out from the land, spiritually as well as in identity, a place is created which enables the poetry to point into the existential mystery at the heart of the being the poet finds there.

Colonial dislocation

Pasture, embryo hills,
The dwelling by the Waterside,
Cotesia, open eye.
Improvident Harold has died:
The two neutral ravenous mills
Munch apathetic rye.⁵

Of course, Hastings is nowhere near Norfolk. Thus we are warned the poem has little to do with Hastings the place but to the particular event in history long associated with it. Redolent with the Norman invasion of Anglo-Saxon England, the nascent region that will become Norfolk, along with its short-lived Catholic enclave around Costessey, barely rates a mention in the Domesday Book. No story yet renders these places meaningful. At this time, nothing of consequence to the history of the victors has yet to draw attention but for the invasion itself, with its Bayeux-tapestry depicting Harold with an arrow in his eye – as every school-pupil has been

³ Andrew Lynch (2006) "‘I See a Strangeness’: Francis Webb’s Norfolk and English Catholic Medievalism": 40.

⁴ Andrew Lynch (2006) "‘I See a Strangeness’": 44.

⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 286

taught, possibly erroneously – justifying the terrible *Harrowing of the North* that followed hard on its heels. Webb presents us with yet another confrontation with desolation:

Buried the old laissez-faire.
Totalitarian herald,
Domesday Book, and banner
Deride the schoolboy Harold,
Twirl militant arms in the air,
Munch ecstatic florin and tanner.⁶

The public potted history of places has been utterly stunted by the litany of place-names, events and kings learnt by rote in the classroom. This places limitations upon entering a convincing relation with a landscape that bears the imprint of its history on and under its surface. Lamely unread by tourists, the landscape reflects their ignorance. But the poet, in drawing our attention to the ignorance of shallow history, sets himself apart from that superficial company: “All the Harolds must die in battle /Before the indoctrinate troops.”

Yet what the poet does see is the manifold of generations of peasant farmers toiling beneath the yoke of their corrupt feudal lords:

Villein, villein, villein;
Pannage for one hundred hogs
[....]
Borders, plough-teams to hand
With the secret documents, logs.
Give us fourteen sure head of cattle
Escheating to Crown, State, Power,
Welcome reconnoitring groups.⁷

The fact of invasion meets the Australian poet’s eye with a certain irony given the English invasion of Australia that was still in process though Australia had long been settled. Landscapes not merely reveal the tortured remains of history’s outfall but have been intentionally superimposed with the face of the conqueror, superseding all prior images of

⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 286.

⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 286.

ownership buried beneath. The landscape thus becomes a palimpsest of power. Yet Webb's sympathies are clearly and irrevocably aligned with the dispossessed, the persecuted and the marginalised,⁸ forced from the land or prevented from conferring their land upon their descendants. The reference to "*escheating* to Crown, State, Power" identifies this process of dispossession following the brutal suppression of Anglo-Saxon society. If the poet wants to present a picture of Medievalism – the Arcadia of the Middle Ages expounded by Ruskin, Morris, Hopkins, Chesterton and Waugh – it is not one of communal unity or rustic idyll but compromised through acts of mass-destruction, rather like the twentieth-century when the poet was writing, following the horrors of World War II. The reference to the settler's land-grab in Australia is, I think, obvious. Andrew Lynch tells us: "Webb's 1066 is an efficient colonialist land-grab, proleptic of Australia's European settlement in 1788."⁹

Harold's supplanted regime is described as "*laissez-faire*," a Norman term usually applied to Liberal-Capitalism, thus casting the Norman conquest in the hue of totalitarian Communism – "indoctrinate troops" – therefore, also casting Medieval history as a Cold War mould. Under such a withering exegesis, the fictions of Medievalism cannot reflect comparison with the sacred truth of the landscape. Andrew Lynch writes:

As an introduction to 'Around Costessey', therefore, '1 Hastings' does not provide either a stable historical origin or a confident appropriation of the past for modern purposes. Rather, Webb exposes both these moves as themselves instances of totalizing imposition in which power is the only truth, mentally alienating the place from its 'fullness' and foreclosing its potential meaning for the present onlooker – 'Cotesia, open eye'.¹⁰

If "Hastings" proves to be a typical Webb flanking manoeuvre fixed well in desolation, then the next poem, "Our Lady's Birthday," offers another, more positive response to the history of discrete periods dictated by regime change.

⁸Andrew Lynch (2006) "I See a Strangeness": 48.

⁹Andrew Lynch (2006) "I See a Strangeness": 50.

¹⁰Andrew Lynch (2006) "I See a Strangeness": 51.

The spirit of place

“Hastings” presented us with a vision of despair every bit as desolate as, for example, the South Australian settler in *Eyre All Alone*. With “Our Lady’s Birthday,” a cyclical temporal flow is substituted. Reflecting the ever-present sanctification of the land and its people, the recurrent feast day of the Madonna’s birth on 8 September follows every year 9 months after the feast day of the Immaculate Conception. Introducing this recurring event in sacred, cyclic time reinforces the mystery at its heart: the origin of the incarnation and redemption for existential reality, in reply to the desolation wrought by the fragmentation of linear time.¹¹ We are ushered into an entirely new way of relating to this land through the testament and witnessing of a symbolic event. The event is thus brought to fruition with every re-statement rather than as a single event that has happened once and for all.

Eleven o’clock. Reservoirs of Heaven,
Waters of the sun,
No-colour; and a rippling
Before the prospecting nervous eye.
And a tenderness wherein Calvary is begun
And sunset foreboded, a tenderness coupling
White heat with goldenness; and the seven
Rainbow sorrows; and the urchin sea
Clambering about; and the haystack library,
Academic decorous morocco and vellum
Bound, stalled in the heavy light upon a calm.¹²

“No-colour” – white contains all other colours but paradoxically is not, itself, a “colour” properly so-called – and calm, after the symbolic violence of desolate history with its identifiable discriminations, Webb invokes a tender timelessness imparted in references to the birth of Mary, the road to Calvary to which Mary will give birth, to her seven sorrows and to the Medieval monks in inscribing her story on the “decorous morocco and vellum” in such masterpieces as the

¹¹Andrew Lynch (2006) “I See a Strangeness”: 51.

¹²Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 286-7.

Book of Kells. The “seven rainbow sorrows” clearly refer to the seven sorrows of Mary: 1 The Prophecy of Simeon; 2 The Flight into Egypt; 3 Losing the Child Jesus; 4 Meeting Jesus on the Way to Calvary; 5 Witnessing the Death of Jesus on the Cross; 6 The Pieta (embracing the dead Jesus), and 7 Jesus’ Entombment.¹³ Yet the “rainbow” once again collects the “no-colour” of white, pure and untrammelled by Original Sin. So that, in her sorrows, Mary stands against “the lewd snake-bodied wind,” the oblivion of desolate history that was provoked by the serpent in the mythic Garden. For all the suffering of humanity – one cannot help but be reminded of Webb’s own suffering caused by his schizophrenia and its treatments – her sufferings brought forth the benediction of the Incarnation and the Passion:

And you are an arch hurled across the wicked chasm
By your Playfellow, of the matchless mind.¹⁴

“Matchless,” notes Andrew Lynch, refers to a fifteenth-century Marian lyric:

I sing maiden
That is makeles;
King of all kings
To her son she ches.¹⁵

Granting extensive intertextuality to his poetry, Webb’s metaphors impart a dense fabric of allusion, generating vast expansion in the mediation with the world. This is a landscape that sparkles with insight drawn from the *Bible* – such as God’s “Plaything,” Wisdom, from *Proverbs* 8: 22-35, with whom Mary was identified in the Middle Ages – and from Medieval lyric and Marian litany. Thus the Virgin Mary mediates the very fabric of creation imparted through the mystery – some might say: “paradox” – of her being a being in grace. She encourages the poet’s “prospecting nervous eye” to perceive in the paradox of suffering, that has covered this land with a palimpsest of pain, the benefaction of sacred time. And thus, it renders renewed hope for those who suffer the dread imposition of history’s invasions.

¹³ Andrew Lynch (2006) “I See a Strangeness”: 51 n 32.

¹⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 287.

¹⁵ Andrew Lynch (2006) “I See a Strangeness”: 51 n 33.

The benediction imparted to the landscape by the reverence for Mary, in antithesis to the trauma of lineal history, receives its counterpart in nature by the spontaneous presence of two old horses in a field. A spiritual idyll is recaptured through the irrepressible rhythms of nature naturing, gently unfolding before the onlooking poet as a meditation – or a prayer – penetrating to the core of reality:

The vegetative soul is the dedicated rhetorician:
Yellow knuckles of gorse are eloquent; motion
Is the psyche entire whose fullness is naked growing
Ungirt with passion or reflection.¹⁶

Yet, elemental though this vision appears, the spiritual presence that has been opened to the poet's eye through the intercession of the Madonna, can be recognized in the daily existence of the land, unimpeded by interfering humans intent on their own business:

Grass meanders intoxicate in green simple action,
Little hills troll the pastoral catches, allowing
Hosannas of Saints in sober gesture alive
As flowering cherry along a drive.¹⁷

The river Wensum brings a reminder of the anguish and pitiless haste of the city – “With the Wensum comes consecrated ordered Wish /From weedy tenements the spying suburban fish” – and of the poet himself – “Plucked from his element, each convulsed dreamer beats /Agony for his city streets.” City-men subject the countryside to being weighed and measured and assigned monetary value: “Discuss certain shadows, suns as wool or rayon, /Choose certain baits as tranquillisers, pills.” That is, it is “enframed,” as Martin Heidegger would have it, by the technological, instrumental grip of the economic order, without remorse or compassion; the same motivation behind the technological alienation that has overtaken and captured the poet's sickened mind: tranquillizers, pills and shock-therapy.

¹⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 287.

¹⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 287.

In contrast, the two horses stand, just a “phylum apart” from the energetic fish of human alienation, bearing their travails with fortitude and patience – “(Flies conspire to transfix the sweating land.)” Bill Ashcroft sees the horses’ plight as degenerative, insufficient in the face of human spiritual liberation. By focusing upon the “buzzing swarming flies” as eroding “this hackneyed summer weather,” that he interprets as a metaphor for *human* consciousness, Ashcroft claims that this is a state from which the horses have been banished.¹⁸ Yet it is also clear that the horses stand beside each other in silent communion, licking away the salt from each other’s flanks, therefore removing the pestilence of flies attracted to their sweat:

The pair of them will stand an hour together
Licking each other’s sides with great slow tongues.
[...]
Memory, rumour, and an hour spin in the guise
Of the buzzing swarming flies.¹⁹

In the “buzzing swarming flies,” a metaphor for “memory, rumour, and an hour,” lineal time makes its impotent, ineffectual presence felt. What a shortened form it has become. And the presentness of the horses transcends these fragments of linearity through the reassertion of circular time. Tomorrow, the horses will be doing the same thing. They are not banished from the tide of human-like consciousness as they are removed from the terrible burden of memory and rumour that brings the desolation of lineal time into a reality.

The last stanza Bill Ashcroft particularly identifies as connected to the “dreamer,” the poet wandering through the landscape but, once again, it is just as likely that the two horses have merged into a single mythic “he,” the poet grasping their being as beings in same kind of iconic relation as the Virgin in “Our Lady’s Birthday”:

He will give his body to the gesticulating
Green grass without forethought. He will lie beating, awaiting
The perfect town of water, going, gone.
He is the listing hulk or bale of straw

¹⁸ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 162.

¹⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 288.

In silt of the inorganic; pang of law
Tides him into rivers and the sun.
Light plays throughout his muddled floating things,
His action, desire, his gift of tongues.²⁰

The “gift of tongues” certainly refers to the gentle relief from the flies afforded by their mutual licking with “great slow tongues.” But it is also a clear reference to the Pentecost, the gift of tongues that was brought down on the disciples by the Holy Spirit. Therein the mythic status of the two horses is underlined. Andrew Lynch writes:

Through the animal soul’s humble version of Pentecost (and of poetry), the landscape within time still communicates its maker. The ‘he’ of Webb’s last stanza is undifferentiated, showing the undisrupted closeness between God and his ‘irrational’ creation.²¹

The metaphoric relation of the horses’ belonging to the land as a benediction on the land and its occupants by the Holy Spirit clearly grants us a vision of our own possibilities that is a variant of the mythic mediation of the Madonna from the previous poem. Yet the two modes are definitively related, for it was the Madonna who opened the poet’s eyes to such a benediction. During the Middle Ages, the Holy Spirit was regarded as feminine and intimately connected to the Cult of the Virgin. The language Webb uses is not uncritical of the horses. Nevertheless, it is particularly gentle and sympathetic. This benediction of God’s grace is naturally played out through the lives of the beasts, not in any extraneous, theoretical belief. Faith must not be something that we accept outside the circle of life but needs to be integral to the living of life itself. The distance between faith, which plunges to the core of life through its interaction with existential doubt, and belief as mere idea thus comes to be made palpable through the experiential reverence of the horses that Webb saw in a field beside a river; water, once again, implicit in his experience of spiritual grace.

Following World War II, a number of books about underground priests became popular. One of these was the autobiography of Elizabethan priest John Gerard (1564-1637), which had

²⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 288.

²¹ Andrew Lynch (2006) “‘I See a Strangeness’”: 53.

been newly translated and published in 1951.²² Webb's poem "Gerard, S. J." is divided into two parts: The first tells of the priest's arrival in Tudor England, filled with fervent hope and aware of renewed possibility; the second relates the dehumanising process of torture for priest and torturer alike, but also of the possibility of salvation for both men. Over the two halves of the poem, the fundamental arithmetic of persecution manifests its long calculations in persecutor and martyr, the two roles from the same brutal equation. But the determinism surrounding the two is broken by an enactment of grace that denies the torturer his victory. Webb's schizophrenia often developed into unbearable feelings of persecution and paranoia. His suffering receives its definitive response here.

Gerard undertook his secret ministry in Norfolk tending pastoral care to the Catholics there,²³ so he is profoundly written onto the landscape of Costessey. His time was spent in ever-present danger, for to be discovered by the agents of the Queen would not merely lead to expulsion but deliver him into the hands of the torturers, from which it was not expected he would survive.

The dinghy runs aground. This tiny bay
Is clenched in the obsessive bowels of night,
Cannot abide the broadening vent of day
And the odd strictures of invading light.²⁴

The visceral complex of metaphors drawn from childbirth return us to the sufferings of the Virgin, which eventually brought the Cross and the Resurrection to expiate the sins of humanity. Here, the implication is made clear by this parallel: Gerard, the Catholic priest is delivering the same salvation to those who would receive him as that wrought by the sufferings of the Virgin. Again in a poem by Webb, a seagull reveals the presence of God's grace, but this time the metaphor does not bear the lightness of flight, it is ponderous, filled with pain and tortuous moment:

²² Andrew Lynch (2006) "I See a Strangeness": 53-4.

²³ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 163.

²⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 288.

A gull is delivered, screams in heavy flight:
I am delivered, wading from the grey
Placenta towards the insufferably bright
At land's end shines the glittering dancing spray.²⁵

How much the priest has come to preach to all, from “giant queen” to “nomad goatherd,” revealing his potential congregation, secretly assembled “in one lean Tudor street,” the light that shines throughout the pall of their spiritual ignorance or from beneath the dread power of repression:

And let me talk of darkness and the pliant
Ocean and wading into light and land.²⁶

That same light shines through the darkness that descends upon the second half, a picture of torment as the brutal Topcliffe exerts his tortures upon the hapless priest. But who is in torment? For Webb's torturer, like Hoess, the brutal commandant of Auschwitz, does not bear the eloquence of the sadist nor carries the visage of evil.²⁷ His is a fallen state, a volcano of chaotic eruption before spiritual creation has rendered it into a being:

Topcliffe is earth's face. His volcanic whim
Has hung me here suspended by each wrist,
My senses rapier back and forth for him,
Lava's upon his beard and prodding fist.²⁸

Most telling is the line that draws a direct equality between the two men; both are in torment: “I dangle, Topcliffe dangles. Which grows dim?” The sense of the torturer's identification with the earth is both a fallen state and the suffering wrought by this plane of existence to which we all succumb. Topcliffe has been identified with the sorrows of lineal history to which he has condemned himself. In the characterization of this later period, Topcliffe stands, for Webb, as *Hastings'* dread representative: the horror of totalitarian power that has

²⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 288.

²⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 289.

²⁷ E. Roditi q. in Bettelheim, Bruno. (1971) *The Informed Heart*: 241.

²⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 289.

rendered the land desolate. But although he bears the power of life and death over the priest, yet it is only the physical, earthly realm that has been polluted by his instrumental power:

If this should not be death, I'll pace again
The fenland of his temples and the shale
Of the pocked skin below his cheek bones, ask
A cloud to bawl and beg some show of rain,
Till there erupt from him the rose-en-soleil
Dangling and swinging. That is all my task.²⁹

If he should survive the vile ministrations of his torturer, Gerard foresees himself returning to the pastoral care of the land but, in particular, of the lost souls that feature Topcliffe and his ilk amongst their very number. Whereas in reality, the priest Gerard portrayed Topcliffe as the instrument of evil,³⁰ Webb does not deny to this dark lord the potential for redemption, for is he not a man just like his victim, a man confronting his own radical finitude? The “rose-en-soleil” that will “erupt from him [...] dangling and swinging” was specifically Edward IV’s badge of York. But Andrew Lynch thinks Webb might have been referring to the Jesuit emblem.³¹ There, the letters for Jesus – I H S – surmounted by a Cross, are set within a sunburst. The spiritual exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, gained a wide acceptance throughout European society, even in Elizabethan England, where protestant versions were also published. So that, although the Reformation split Europe into two warring factions of Christianity, Ignatius Loyola was available in admissible or disguised forms for even the redemption of men exactly like the dogmatic Topcliffe to reach some kind of redemption.³² The priest thus assumes the role of earthly representative for the Jesuit Order, ministering even to the brutal Topcliffe who is not beyond hope. “That is all my task.” Torture has become an instrument for meditation and preaching the Word, no longer just a brutal means for coercion and vendetta. Breaking the dualism between oppressors and oppressed, Webb equates the radical

²⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 289.

³⁰ Andrew Lynch (2006) “‘I See a Strangeness’”: 55.

³¹ Andrew Lynch (2006) “‘I See a Strangeness’”: 55-6.

³² Louis L. Martz (1954) *The Poetry of Meditation*:

finitude of both men with the instrumentality which confines each in the role of victor or victim. How the torturer has become as ill-served by the instrumental relation with the world as his victim is reflected in his need for redemption from exactly that same state. It is possible to recognize a brother and deliverer in him who is locked in instrumental captivity to the pain he intentionally forces upon others. Bill Ashcroft identifies this as: “*out of Topcliffe, out of the earth, out of man’s limitations bursts forth the “rose-en-soleil”, the infinite and eternal nature.*”³³ For those of us locked into a similar, if perhaps far less brutal, instrumentality – as it no doubt was for Webb himself at that time during this period of incarceration – the drama of Gerard and Topcliffe steps beyond their specific historical setting to reveal the potential for each one of us to find redemption in the very instrumental limitations that so confine us. Redemption is to be found where we are. The country, in which the poet is walking and musing, proves itself the site for his own salvation, there where he is. Although events seemed to have taken us far from the Norfolk country, in fact we are still situated firmly within its long, low and flat vistas.

The scherzo from Bruckner’s unfinished ninth symphony is not, as its name might suggest, a happy, joking piece. On the contrary, it beats its themes out anxiously, a sharp edge disposing of any illusion we might have of lingering idyllic beauty. And yet, like the foregoing poem, in which the instrument of torture becomes the ground for a sermon on forgiveness and redemption, the spirit of the poet is able to struggle beyond the instruments of his anxiety and paranoia, to transcend them and seek beauty where one might not expect to find it:

For certain it is on a day very like this one
That he breaks the submarine and constricting circuit
Of doctors and nurses – patiently woven algae –
That he rises to the sun so rotund and benign.³⁴

The sense of struggle and emergence,³⁵ entailed by the parenthetical subtitle to the poem – “(*And a tree, fishlike, engaged for its instant with air*)” – returns us to marine metaphors: “the

³³ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 164.

³⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 289.

³⁵ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 164.

urchin sea” and “spying suburban fish,” respectively. Whether the “tree” refers to a real tree standing tall upon the low, flat Norfolk country, or it expresses the situation of the poet, both inspirational like Bruckner’s Symphony is inspirational, may not matter in the long run. Given that the poem begins with a very personal description referring to Webb’s incarceration in the mental asylum, implies the latter. The fact that Bruckner himself suffered mental deterioration from his obsessive composing reverberates throughout the poem. It must have held great appeal for the ailing Webb. The Ninth Symphony was left incomplete at the composer’s death, curtailed to just the three movements:

1. Feierlich (misterioso) [Celebration (mysterious)]
2. Scherzo (bewegt, lebhaft) [Jest (eventful, lively)]
3. Sehr langsam (feierlich) [Very slow (celebration)] ³⁶

Although, who would consider the symphony really incomplete? On listening to the work, which might only contain three movements instead of the usual four, it does not seem unfinished. One presumes the “Adagio” in the title of the poem is the first movement, Feierlich (misterioso), a slow, dignified and grand piece that, typically for Bruckner, haltingly swells from silence to a majestic anthem somewhat reminiscent of Wagner at his best. The reduced symphony serves to remind us of the victory of the artist over the adversities thrown up by instrumental desolation, similar to the triumph of the spirit in the face of the instruments of torture in the previous poem.

After the intrinsic anxiety of the hard-edged scherzo, the symphony returns to a celebration of life and nature, like the first movement, that is marked “very slow,” rising to a majestic climax of joy and peace. There is also doubt but that only serves to lift the majestic strains of faith ever more powerfully. It is likely Bruckner knew this work would be his last. Webb’s poem bears the contrast, within each stanza, between the poet’s present and the composer’s past, juxtaposing each, thus negating the historical and geographical distance between the two artists. They are both in eclipsed presence, standing guarantor to the works that bear their names. The poet addresses an “old man,” clearly the composer:

³⁶Anton Bruckner (1996) *Symphony No. 9*.

– Old man, they have torn the stocky Vienna apart,
Plotted each motion of the bowels and the sluggish timpani of the heart;
Cock-crow is the thermometer; fingers caress the wrist;
All love is become this mothering smothering beast...³⁷

Yet the music and the poetry overflow each other so that there is no simple bifurcation of periods, for that would negate cyclic sacred time established in the second poem. We hear both Webb and Bruckner mirrored in each era. Yet the music and poetry rise to a new apotheosis of spirit, fully answering the sorrows brought on by the imposition of power-politics. How the sun always shines on the cattle in the fields and the old people, their rustic walking sticks clattering down the gravel roads:

The sun is assembling, as on all days at this hour,
His entire barony. Tiny preoccupied cows
Lounge their slow mile, and even the knotted rural
Walking stick sounds gravel as by a sort of writ.
– *Old man, Hans Richter smiles in the ruined city,
Like a fine cat on a gatepost. Pad and claw of pity.
Yes, you are greater than Beethoven. The furtive griefs,
Gulps, quick inhalations and, moist handkerchiefs...*³⁸

Memory connects the landscapes in which both poet and composer walk. The time and the place are a cyclic repetition of the e allegory that enables a profound relation; *is* a profound relation. What situates the composer, the poet and the reader lies in the mythic power to locate. He is still an on-looker set apart from country. Yet that very setting-apart is the ground upon which the relation is based, a relation that enables the mythic dimension to locate both the composer and the poet within creation. “He pauses near the trees, the suave chevron, lozenge, tongue, /Heraldic blossom.”³⁹

The juxtaposition of metaphor derived from medieval symbolism over against personal memory creates tension between the circularity of spiritual redemption and the linearity of

³⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 289.

³⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 290.

³⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 290.

conventional historiography and biography. Vienna is in a state of corruption and change. But the city seems also to stand for the poet's dread infirmity that ties him to the orders of a mental hospital, his private Vienna, as it were. Webb perceives the mystery of the composer's creativity through the lens of his own poetic mystery. That draws the two men, separated by time, era and place to merge into a single spiritual movement. Each marks the returning wheel of being to the reality of the artist in relation to the world, both as present landscape and as distant institutional turmoil:

The sun is at a standstill. And it is time to go back.
Is not this his house, is not this the shining room?
He weighs them: the room, and the ruined city of his failure.
Where is the light at its most exciting, most truthful?
– *Old man, where are you going? The burly overgrown*
Climax of steeping horns is overthrown;
Pause, suck in breath, while dying Vienna turns pale.
*The huge Theme masses. You are wasted and frail . . .*⁴⁰

Entropy – entropy associated with the vicissitudes of a lineal history – at work in the old organ of St Florians, entropy introduced in the squabbling students or simply a result of old age before death returns the body back to dust, embodies the hardships of life from which art, great art, emerges to aspire toward the metaphysical, transcendent realm and consequently, as Bill Ashcroft says, “the cumulative impression of the poem is one of immense dignity.”⁴¹

The figure of humanity stands upon the ground as vertical as the tower of the poem “The Tower”, stamping his image upon the landscape. The tower in question is, according to Andrew Lynch, the ruined but still imposing ‘Thornbury Tower,’ built as part of a mid-Victorian medieval-inspired extension to Costessey Hall, but since Webb’s time there, it has been demolished. It seems that fêtes were once held in the surrounding park but by the 1950s the area was already abandoned. More pertinent, prior to 1900 the annual Easter Monday practice, called the “Cossey Guild” or “Gyle,” was held to elect a “mayor” for Whitsunday in which children

⁴⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 290.

⁴¹ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 165.

took a prominent role.⁴² “The Tower” focuses upon Easter Monday, conflating the historical elements into a single project that stresses cyclic sacred-time of “Our Lady’s Birthday”:

Come on Easter Monday to our Poor Meadow.
Here is a childhood: the florin of the sun aglow.⁴³

That this indicates how much all people – young and old, rich and poor, noble and peasant – have been invited to partake in the celebrations is underlined by the reference to the “Poor Meadow,” the common land upon which the parish poor could graze their animals prior to the Land Enclosures. The festivities are held upon the palimpsest of place centred around the great vertical axes of elm and tower; the elm’s “hypostatic shadow” – also the tower’s shadow – the centripetal mythic substance or principle that binds the land, its people and the recurrent event into a unity of spirit. From the presence of the children, the whole scene has been painted with hues of innocence and regeneration. Easter Monday, the day following the resurrection stands for new life.

You are young, young, cradling the sacred bowl
And knife of flint. Ages leap in your body
And flood into unselfconscious soul.⁴⁴

The sensibility of Yeats’ “The Stolen Child,”⁴⁵ in which “the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand,” also marks the fragility of a child’s innocence for Webb. Therein, the hegemony of ruling élites (so powerfully evoked in “Harold”) now gives way to the even more destructive forces of industry. Webb might be giving us here a conventional reading of the anti-natural and anti-spiritual dimension of modern industry, yet what he focuses on is not the ugliness of the industrial landscape but its cruelty somewhat reminiscent of Topcliffe’s torture, that must bear within it the possibility of redemption. He also focuses upon the disruption to the ancient fabric of the land and its cyclical processes, destroying the cycles of sacred-time:

⁴² Andrew Lynch (2006) “‘I See a Strangeness’”: 57.

⁴³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 291.

⁴⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 291.

⁴⁵ William Butler Yeats (1994) *The Poems*: 44-5.

I alight here beside you like that old lag the crow
Telling you to go now and never return
That today may lie quiet against ages when you burn
In vats of the cruel smelter – only go now, go –
When all things are full of labour; and the mind
Fretting and hammering at itself will drag
A landscape, a universe, to be refined
Out of its nature, drifting in rotten slag.⁴⁶

Unlike his poet-hero Gerard Manly Hopkins, Webb does not need to reject earthly existence. Out of the bitter experience of his mental illness, he knows that pain, corruption and loss of innocence are episodes that might quickly arrive but just as quickly leave. One is reminded of the torments of Christ's passion, on the one hand, and the torments of Gerard. Despair in the "dark night of the soul" remains a natural point in the cycle of salvation: "I could not stand and feel, nor write a word." Webb "chooses his despair" in precisely the way Kierkegaard advocates, therefore locating himself within the eschatology of Christianity's mythic dimension.

What frightens you must be a ruin, and waste.
But on this Easter Monday I will drink
Your Costessey to the dregs, and likely think
To find in these red stones the selfsame taste.
For out of my soul one hundred times before
Has leapt a ghostly thing, bare in its power,
As faith, and to the ceaseless causeless war
Brought truce, bearing itself like this old tower.⁴⁷

Webb denies to historiography its power to enframe being and the human spirit in a succession of eras, whether medieval or modern. Nor to behold within history the succeeding periods of purity and evil corresponding to such times as the Reformation or the present. The

⁴⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 291

⁴⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 292.

sense of morality that is assigned to historical events and periods has been transcended by affirming redemptive possibility in all events and in all periods.

Art and suffering

Comprising four distinct poems written around the figure of the little known Victorian painter Anthony Sandys, “In Memoriam” strives to discern the beatific illumination in art, declared from the start: “Bird-song is your reverberating touch.” Anthony Sandys, a painter of the Norwich school,⁴⁸ predominately painted pictures of the Norfolk landscape and thus, art and landscape are both identified in the single figure of the artist and his work.

Bird-song in the opening line, like seagulls in Webb’s early poems, clearly invokes the image of the Holy Spirit as the descending white dove of Pentecost. Webb feels he gropes along the ground on a cold midwinter’s day as his poetry freeze-frames the moment, cold as the bitter landscape. The painter, on the other hand, remains in the warmth depicted in his painting:

Let my ungainly icicled pencil search
Down below zero: you are temperate, risen.⁴⁹

The painter brings the poet to the realization both of his mortal suffering and the spiritual possibilities in his ungainly groping towards the transcendent, to fly like the artist on the wings of art: “temperate, risen.”

Your canny brush-stroke and beatitude
And hallowed second, bravely out of fashion,
Leap beyond Hydra, in eternal motion.
My gropings broaden into hour and day
Awaiting the wash of your great altitude.⁵⁰

There is at least a double play occurring here. The metaphors of cold and freezing, the cycles of winter, depict the poet scrambling through suffering to reach beyond his iced-in world. Yet, the same bitter cold does itself turn toward warmth and joy as winter points towards the onset of spring and summer, intimated by the painter’s masterly touch on the canvas. All the poet

⁴⁸ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 167.

⁴⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 292.

⁵⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 292.

need do is to return to the presence of the painting, hung in his side room. There in front of it, his “hungry frame traps light” and he stands erect, no longer cowed by the inhibiting cold. But though the sense of suffering and oppression returns – “Cannot sustain that feather-gentle word, /Lies gaping on the stockpile or the floor” – nevertheless, the cycle will return that joyous moment again to bear upon the darkness of his anguish, the same return recalling that of metaphor’s mystery as well as of the sanctified circle in sacred time.

The poem “Self-portrait,” according to Bill Ashcroft, shows us not only art as on-looking observation but also as participation, Webb summing it up in what Ashcroft regards as the poet’s “artistic manifesto”⁵¹ written in the words: “An outline of fullness soberly embraced /By shadow of widest meaning is creation.” This Wordsworthian “fullness soberly embraced” emphasizes the apparent ambiguity at the heart of all art, whether written or applied, that grasps the existential dimension of the duality between distance and relation made concrete in a single figure, rather like the “strife” Heidegger identifies in the work of art, though not nearly so violent.⁵² Herein, the wintry metaphor and simile, in the antechamber to the next poem, “Death,” serves to bring forth renewed life within itself before the Spring is even announced:

Fullness, shadow: lean forward from the wall
Of Stranger’s Hall, beneath languid chandelier.
Strangeness the womb of this alien prayerful place.
And the propitious pallor of your face
Is orderly, at once wind-rise and still
As the sinewy exquisite living winter flower.⁵³

Each stanza opens with the words “Fullness, shadow” marking a synthesized opposition like the chiaroscuro of Leonardo, who used shade and light to sculpture his forms on the canvas, granting them gravity and grace. Both light and dark, faith and doubt, life and death, hold their reality open because no one can abolish the other. Indeed, one grants the presupposition of the other and depends for its being on the rocks of the other’s stalwart reality:

⁵¹W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 168.

⁵² Martin Heidegger (1971) “On the Origin of the Work of Art”:

⁵³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 293.

Fullness, shadow: what to tell again
But the so tender voyaging line of truth.
Time shuffles a timid foot, will linger
While the tired cockcrow of your lifted finger
Opens dawn and a worn album of love and pain.
Brown eyes and hair flow humbly from the earth.⁵⁴

While an artist's pigments are derived from ground earth, a point that Heidegger was almost too quick to recognize,⁵⁵ nevertheless, the metaphors point more to the origin and birth pangs of humanity. The emergent morning in "the tired cockcrow of your lifted finger /Opens dawn" and the experience of childbirth through "a worn album of love and pain," acts to acknowledge the origin of all that makes us human, as grasped by art. The mythic dimension has barely to be reached when the poem ends. Webb accomplishes a discrete reference to the *Genesis* story of life breathed by God into the earthen Adam in that last line: "Brown eyes and hair humbly flow from the earth." With life comes its accompanying partner, death, necessary to bring being its chiaroscuro of significance.

Suffering has consistently been united with vision throughout the poem cycle, the same unity of suffering with comfort, doubt with faith, damnation and salvation, which characterizes that ultimate symbol of Christianity, the Crucifix. There in the painting stands the upright windmill, its great wind-vanes stretching up and outwards like the arms of the Cross perpendicular to the flat horizontal of the Norfolk fens. Such a painting, reproduced in Michael Griffith's *God's Fool*, was one of a collection Francis Webb brought back with him to Australia, after his sojourn in England, which now hangs in the Willoughby Municipal Library.⁵⁶ Within a pastoral landscape, that a mill should imitate the Cross does come as little surprise to us, given Webb's metaphors intimating such identities:

Form kisses form in a fine and lowing fettle.
The mill that kissed his soul again is seen

⁵⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 293.

⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger (1971) "On the Origin of the Work of Art": 34, 46-9.

⁵⁶ Michael Griffiths (1991) *God's Fool: Illus.*

Bearing by day as by nightfall the tall Cross.⁵⁷

The repeated pattern in the opening line of each stanza draws “Norfolk” and “green” into a constant embrace. What is surprising is how much a poem titled “Death” should be so brimming with life. For though the artist has been long gone, his paintings still grant access to the bright brushstrokes of his vision. Death, the poet seems to be saying, does not finish life but brings it into high relief, making each moment of our living profoundly and enduringly precious:

Norfolk, be greenness winter and summer, shine
Above the enkindled outstretched light returning
Homeward laboriously in the right direction.
Metaphor and flesh await a resurrection.
So hoarder Norfolk’s sketch of patient bone
Bides colour, hand of the draughtsman, the Beginning.⁵⁸

The natural theology that comes through all of Webb’s work is here transposed from a simple relation with nature – if ever such a relation could ever be “simple” – into a concern for works of art that bring forth the sense of being in a consecrated landscape, themselves consecrated and consecrating their viewers. The poem in its commentary is more than a critique. It is a revealing of that which is suggested by the paintings.

Suffering – here in a clear reference to the artist’s tuberculosis: “So he sups keenest air, /Coughs into laundered silk, with windows wide” – and the all-seeing eye of the artist’s sensibility are both encompassed by the poet’s vision, each stanza of this fourth poem on Anthony Sandys commencing with the poet *seeing*: “I see him [...],” in the first stanza, “And I see [...],” introducing the second and third. The everyday reality of human dishevelment, apparently ignoble, seemingly trite, yet reaching outward to some other, deeper truth, is faithfully transcended and augmented by the bewitching presence of the artistic vision and, dare we say, the poetic as well, not divorced from the fundament of human detritus but growing from its rich, loamy soil:

⁵⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 294.

⁵⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 294.

I see him in a sense as strapped to his chair,
Bloodstained with erudition, unafraid;
Into the studio earth comes floundering
Under swag of gifts to embrace the senses, sting,
Or do both often.⁵⁹

Framed by stanzas situated well within everyday reality, the second stanza reaches out to the sanctified landscape captured by the artistic vision to present a way for the viewer to grasp its poetic existence:

And I see the Broads at sunset, skimming past:
Shadows on water, sun, and natural blue
Moving as one at supernatural speed.
To engage those Broads of the spirit is their need
Beauty, be tongue of fire, of the Holy Ghost,
For the mill and the haggard Cross are moving too.⁶⁰

The framing of this stanza serves to bring that which is sanctified, the artistic vision, within the compass of everyday reality. While the vision transcends the fundament of ordinary being, it does not deny or negate that being. Rather it seeks to enhance it, open it, fulfil it. To reveal the gold within the sackcloth of ordinary reality and, thus, to enrich it and our relation with it. The final stanza thrusts this vision, which is normally denied to the practicalities of living, right into the heart of the practical machinery of existence, below ordinary concern, to which we might be unconscious, perhaps, but still there:

A courage unmans me, a ritual generous teaching
Forsaken for a spell but overreaching
staircase and cockroach and forgetfulness,
While machines of burning mumble in the cellar.⁶¹

Again the next poem, “Rookery”, discloses the “landscape of the consciousness”⁶² in a different way. The “Rookery” of the title is as much a metaphor for the human mind as it is of

⁵⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 294.

⁶⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 295.

⁶¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 295.

⁶² W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 169.

crows. The projections of what we fear in ourselves seek solace by blaming that which is an “other”:

To unseat that fell principle roosting in the mind
Man tightens, peers for a scapegoat in his hunger
To where you wink and dice with barmaid wind
Or guffaw halleluiahs fathoms beyond your anger.⁶³

The language is taut and finely woven, calling for reflection to unlock its profound lesson, though we could hardly call the poem didactic. Confronting the existential finitude of guilt, the human mind projects it upon an allegorical entity “ticketed round /With scurrilities of poets,” in this case the rook. “Lolling black workman,” the rook is the “atonal singer” whose “sennet of praise,” like a trumpet fanfare announcing some triumph, has been appropriated by those wanting to identify the feared stranger with “Old Nick’s sound.” When we look past this surface allegory to the metaphorical mythic realm that truly situates being, we find a very different reality is invoked. Webb takes us aside to point out what he holds dear in the metaphor of the rookery: That trumpeted “sennet of praise” becomes the sung accompaniment to gardens and farewells or road-workers laying down their tools at evening and returning home:

But this evening delinquent brasses melt and croon,
I think of pet garden-circuits, yawn goodbye
From woven bunks and vessels round and deep.
Or I see some pick-and-shovellers at tools down
– Loyal lazy footprints of red roads of sky –
Sway homeward, nattering, towards the original sleep.⁶⁴

Everyday reality, much maligned, of daily routine, of ordinary labour – unsung by none, bar the allegorising Marxist, who lauds it as an absurd heroism – is here given a truly mythic status but not unreal for all that. The common attributes of the return home in the companionship of one’s fellow labourers, “nattering, towards the original sleep,” makes meaningful our commonplace existence, giving it its metaphor in the rook.

⁶³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 295.

⁶⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 295.

The death of a priest, as contingent life, and metaphors derived from the perpetual cycle of the seasons and enduring sun are contrasted, not as opposites but as manifold facets disclosing the same source of being. Bill Ashcroft draws our attention to the belief intrinsic to Thomism of the immanence of God within reality in these lines.⁶⁵ Webb continues to embroider the landscape with his pastoral passion play, redeeming ordinary life and death with mythic intensity:

I write in September, reverencing our spring days
In my side room, with your gentle
Tall solar civilised face
Beleaguered by gusts of pain,
Your sowings of the wily innocent grain;
And you staggering to the chair, elemental.⁶⁶

Immediately we are made aware of the identification of the dying priest with the sun, that which is elemental. The decline of the year, with the onset of the northern autumn in September, sees the passing of the priest. Yet that fact is not a cause for mourning, setting forth the divine strategy that “have this confined sun heave /Ripping its cerecloths,” the waxen shroud of the corpse, “have flowers forget to grieve, /And the haystacks massing.” How the seasonal events still tell of life, though it is life of a different order from the rebirth of spring and full extravagance of summer: “And even since your death autumnal earth around /Bears, bears: there is rising /Stack and sideroom on your chosen ground, /Of star-stature in my brain.”

The contrast of the dying priest against the perpetual cycle of life casts the landscape in a sonorous meditation, pensive, yes, but far from melancholic nevertheless:

If in mortal autumn such prodigies
Of building, benedictory weather,
Can gird the pacific leafage and young trees
Against infiltrating wind, rain,
What passionate stellar building when again
Father, we come together.⁶⁷

⁶⁵W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 169.

⁶⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 296.

⁶⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 296.

This stanza seems almost proposition-like – *if... then...* – but is really a prayer and recognition. For even in the face of death, life steps renewed by the grace underpinning existence. When life reaches its conclusion what “passionate stellar building when again /Father, we come together.” The Father is both priest and the sun, standing as God’s representative within and throughout the world. Webb’s universe is constantly fulfilled in the light of God, quite unlike the absurd universe of Camus, yet far from being a state of bad faith (Sartre). Theologian Raymond Nogar, who brings a Thomist cast to an otherwise existentialist interpretation of evolutionary thought, wrote:

From a picture of order alone, *there is no sense of dependence in being*. The question is not: Why this order, or why that order? The real question is: Why not nothing? It is only from the awareness of contingency, the “queasy” feeling that your existence is leaning hard on nothing, balanced upon the precipice of non-being, that calls into question your self-sufficiency. You’ve got to sense your creatureliness, not order, to know how dependent and insufficient you are. In fact, the very aesthetics of order may be the greatest impediment of all, obscuring this dependence of our existence by generating an illusion of self-sufficiency. No matter how infinite the time, the space, the duration of the universe, its contingency makes it so perpetually dependent, so perilously close to dropping back into nothing, that it demands the presence of the source of its being every instant to keep it in existence. That Being, upon whom all contingency rests, we call God.⁶⁸

These terrifying words would have rung true for Francis Webb, who felt the chasm of non-being yawning beneath his frame from the ever-present threat of his schizophrenia. But for us, their pertinence lies in the synthesis of death with life, non-being with being, within the same metaphoric curve of Webb’s poem. Here desire and death linger side by side and are captured in the single prayer for being and for its non-being: desire for life, yet also for death; confronting the non-being intrinsic to absolute absence by calling it into being. This message takes on its

⁶⁸Raymond J. Nogar (1966) *The Lord of the Absurd*: 78-9.

most poignant form in “Good Friday, Norfolk,” the last poem of the sequence, immediately from the opening line. A death of sorts precedes revelation.

Cyclic time

“It is achieved,” the last words summoned up by the dying Christ upon the Cross combine with metaphors derived from that dread day, distil the spirit of the Norfolk countryside, in which the poem was written, into a landscape of personal salvation. The mythic centre situates the self, not merely in individuation but into a cosmic order at once transcendent in grandeur and in immanent simplicity, whereupon the human imagination assumes its rightful status by comprehending the ground of being. The same intimidating non-being described by Raymond Nogar, that threatens to annihilate the universe and all being with it, is both present as the undermining abyss, yet held at bay by a saving grace far more powerful than that which undermines. That reality has been guaranteed existence, speaks to the poet of a fundamental spiritual centre underpinning all being and beings. This poem is probably the most complex of the series. Its twists and turns of interweaving metaphor, landscape, spirituality and mind, encompass what Paul Tillich would call “New Being”:

It is achieved. Over the Place of the Skull
A darkness; and I slouch among our trees,
Tasting green and gold of His darkness. Bid the sun
Withdraw into seismic coma; have interval
Of rootless vacancy enwrap the hill
As vineyard and marshland, mountainside and man;
How the star of the camel-train, the lector seas
Strew antiphon from their substance if but one voice,
The known, dry tongue,
Mould those dismantled words about the Cross.⁶⁹

The darkness that descends over Calvary, “the Place of the Skull,” as Jesus breathed his last, recalls the desolate limitations of human finitude that is acknowledged and confirmed by the figure of a man dying a solitary death on a Roman scaffold. But the extraordinary mythic

⁶⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 296-7.

resonance of this dreadful event has retrieved the conscience of the individual as he loiters in the Norfolk landscape: “and I slouch among our trees, /tasting green and gold of His darkness.” Every stanza ends with the striking leitmotif of the Cross, the very same motif identified by the poet portrayed in the painting by Anthony Sandys in those great outstretched vanes of the windmill. Everything in the place within which the poet walks, is gathered up into the arms of the Cross even in the face of their ultimate extinction: “have interval /Of rootless vacancy enwrap the hill /As vineyard and marshland, mountainside and man.”

The songbirds flying high and joyfully singing, are a marvel for Webb, who sees in their ascension and feather lightness “The tiny Pilot nested, twisted upon His Cross.” Perhaps this also alludes to that terrible “nest” of the Crown of Thorns. But the possibilities of the spirit in “vineyard and marshland, mountainside and man” are brought to fruition through the Resurrection. The desolate earth comes to be but the inevitable accompaniment to spiritual redemption. So that even the “late tractor that straddled cloud [...] Blunders up and down certain hills to know His Cross.” And finally, our entire age, not known for its spirituality – more likely, it is known for its materialism, both in form and in mind – is not exempt from spiritual sustenance:

Till I revere our age as the withered Thief
Uttering valid green shoots in his agony.
Till a green visits the earth’s unlatched distended frame.
Till the remembered airletter is the brave leaf.
Till the speeches, deeds, honour unpondered, burn into life
With the dead man’s handclasp, crook a white finger of flame
Upon oil of His darkness that is therapy.
The time is propitious. Dawn in gardener’s dress
Stands close to us:
Word of ploughed lands, of sunrise, and a Cross.⁷⁰

When Mary Magdalene returned to the empty tomb at dawn of Easter Sunday, she mistook the risen Christ for a gardener in morning twilight. The renewal of spring casts the green

⁷⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 297-8.

of young vegetation across “the earth’s unlatched distended frame,” the seasonal circle of time returning to rebirth and the resurrection. Both gardener and spring-growth speak to us of generation and regeneration, the ploughed fields those same fields from the first poem still tilled to this day in the ever-present cycle of life, free from the domination of linear historiography. And so it is for the poet wandering its lanes and byways. Bill Ashcroft sees the poetic cycle as an allegory for the landscape of consciousness:

What these lines bring together is a view of place as a continuous metonym of consciousness. Not only is the Costessey landscape a construction of language and history, a sign of the struggle and suffering of human consciousness, it is also a sign of possibility and regeneration. Consciousness, like its representation, the Costessey landscape, is a text that continues to be written. And this re-writing, for Webb, is one grounded in the necessary elevation of the spirit.⁷¹

This is certainly a valid critique of Webb’s poem. Yet I am not entirely convinced that such a solipsistic interpretation is in keeping with Francis Webb’s acknowledgement of a place, this place, as a source of salvation *from beyond* himself, an affirmation of faith emerging from a community of being that can only be understood along these mythic lines. Bill Ashcroft’s reading serves to identify the mythic as a force of projection onto the landscape, rather than in the contemporary *reading* of a land according to the mythic identity. Andrew Lynch’s neo-Medievalist reading of “Around Costessey” is clearly closer to confirming the mythic kerygma without ascribing to the typical “dual, hierarchized oppositions”⁷² that dominate the fictions of history:

By understanding the meaning of the scene in relation to himself, rather than an original, general ‘Fall’, Webb continues to dispute the notion of solid ‘eras’ of history: pre- and post-lapsarian; medieval and modern; he also refuses to read history, including his own, as an essentialist combat between purity and evil, whether in the Reformation or the present day. ‘Around Costessey’ takes up these dualist hypostatizations to reveal them as constructive, no more than historiographical moods and fashions with which the past is already littered.

⁷¹ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1996) *The Gimbals of Unease*: 171.

⁷² Hélène Cixous (1981) “Sorties” *in* Marks, E. & I. de Courtivron eds. *New French Feminisms*: 91.

Worse, in their attempted enforcement of temporal hierarchies the divisions of historiography deny the omnitemporal persistence of grace, and mimic past traumas – conquest, intolerance, persecution of difference – so that they revive the ‘ceaseless causeless war’ of history. In a more personal way, the poet of ‘The Tower’ knows this partisan tendency as paranoid aggression, ‘the time of gathering stones together’. [...] Refusing to project his anxiety onto a vilified opponent (for this is the logic of persecution itself), and keeping his openness to ‘strangeness’, Webb radically departs from the English Catholic medievalism he knew.⁷³

⁷³Andrew Lynch (2006) “‘I See a Strangeness’”: 59.

Theory Chapter VI

On community: the personal in the poetic situation

A fourth dialectical level is suggested by the Relation, itself a dialectical consequence of Incompleteness and Mystery. Once again, a more inclusive and broader mode of discourse is called for in order to reach beyond the threshold to which Relation has brought us. The means of describing Community is not fully in the ken of a discourse of Relation, although without relation, community would not be possible. Yet the emphasis of interpersonal relation remains upon the *one* in connection with *another*, although that other might be the world; important as a nascent community, yes, but inadequate as mode of rendering the social embodiment of a community as such. That calls for a another discourse capable of including the former dialectical levels into a richer, more inclusive synthesis.

Like all the stages so far outlined, this stage does not occur by necessity in the life of a poem or reader or group of readers. When incompleteness is traversed by the reader, a threshold is reached by which a mystery is invoked but not encountered. It might be that the Incompleteness stage is by-passed by an immediate realisation of the poem's essential mystery. So too, with all the other stages so far encountered. The dialectical method I am employing discloses what is particular about the poetic spirit as it increases its power of inclusive description but it does not enforce a particular process of growth. This evolution of thought does not enforce a developing status for a poem. This stage of Community might be realised in reality in all its potential glory, or it might simply remain an unrealized possibility.

This chapter will identify what is meant by the term "community", attempting via an analogy of the theatre to grasp the nature of what constitutes the connection of the poem and the person and her or his *personal* realm with the particular social grouping we call a community as opposed to an "association" or a "collective", and to find how a poem can *call forth* a community as a *community-builder*, therein becoming essentially a new "myth", its kerygma repeatedly proclaiming the community into existence. The response to this chapter will, in the Conclusion, provide the ground for a final dialectical manoeuvre in which an ethics of the poetic spirit can

finally be undertaken. Community will provide the last plank in a structure that began with poetic incompleteness to build the mould, or negative, for that complete dialectic of the poetic spirit – or as complete as we have space to accomplish.

Community and the personal voice

It is one of the fallacies of postmodernist thought that community necessarily lies within the socio-linguistic conventions forced upon us in childhood. By concentrating upon convention, postmodernism hoped to decentralize all meaning, removing it from what was seen as the tyranny imposed by the authority of the personal voice, perhaps placing too much emphasis upon the common root of the words “author” and “authority”.¹ This is a vain hope. Convention imposes far more than the personal voice ever could, for once a personal voice achieves a position of power, it is by definition no longer “personal”. Convention obliterates the personal, thereby delivering all voices up to the discursive power of custom, every bit as standardizing as the modernist emphasis upon mass-society. Moreover, postmodernists failed to articulate the different ways collectivity might manifest in society, also failing to identify the different modes of power that dictate specific forms of collectivity. Unless a person is empowered, then he or she remains subject to the dictates of praxis, praxis usually dictated by the minions of mass-media, the purveyors of new technology and rationalist pronouncement. Ultimately, it is not language *per se* that acts to threaten or motivate convention but those who enforce its interpretation.

True decentralisation of meaning can only arise with the empowerment of the *personal voice*. But writing, we are told, is constructed at the intersection of discourses and is, thus, a concatenation of fragments, each fragment reaching out to the convention from which it has supposedly arisen.² And yet even in everyday speech, where one might expect the power of convention to be most in evidence, it is hardly a grab-bag of fragments that underlines what and how we speak. Rather speech, everyday speech, aims for the whole meaning towards which speakers grope within the conversation that provokes our choice of words. We speak meaning in

¹ Peter Lamarque (1990) “The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy”: 330.

² Roland Barthes (1977) “The Death of the Author”: 146-147.

context of the relation between us. We do not gather the bitter fragments of discourse together to construct our speech. Rather, our normal speech gathers to it the whole of its meaning and the relation calling it forth.

In poetry, personal speech reaches its apotheosis. The personal voice of the poet is strongest when it is originary. We have found that the poet's voice opens up opportunity for the reader to relate with the poem also in an entirely personal way. And that starts right from the beginning within the possibilities for meaning disclosed by poetic incompleteness, recalling that, as Cantor showed, one infinite number will be distinct from another infinite number,³ so an infinite possibility of meaning does not entail random or arbitrary assignment of meaning.

Decentralisation of meaning is a product of empowering the personal voice, not from the intercession of linguistic convention. It is certainly true that the personal voice of the poet will stand in tension with convention because it both uses and defies convention. Convention can best be defied if it is also acknowledged. If nothing else has been learnt from metaphor, it is that a metaphor depends upon linguistic practice against which it stands in tension. Violation of linguistic custom only occurs when a metaphor becomes a "dead metaphor", when that tension and its defiance no longer exist. We are not merely residing in the portals of a bland restatement of convention but in a very real struggle with the modes of language to body forth the speaking voice as a poem, of which the reader might make her or his independent judgement. Poetic speech does not stop on the threshold of meaning but reaches towards the meaningful and the mystery of other being. Therein, relation comes into fruition along with the potential for a community of faith.

Poetry, we discovered in Theory Chapter 5, involves many ways to characterize its fundamental Relation. Possibly the most startling was the presence of *faith* in the poetic relation with its attendant *doubt*, terms that are rarely thought contingent upon each other. Faith is in a necessary dialectical relation with doubt. But further characterization of poetry incorporates

³ Palle Yourgrau (2001) *A World Without Time*: 45.

relation and its cognates into an even richer conception: the promise of community. As we learn to identify the kind of community made possible by poetry, we will acknowledge aspects of poetry to which we have granted only passing reference. One in particular is the mythic – sometimes called the “mythological” or just plain “myth” according to its usage by those including Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, to some extent Robert Graves, and lesser extent James Frazer. The mythic dimension of poetry can best be appreciated as an expression of poetry’s promise for community.

The community of poetry incorporates and enriches all foregoing explanatory descriptions. It is for this reason that an exposition of community will constitute the final chapter, though not the end of the dialectical process which shall continue into the conclusion. There are further dialectical possibilities, for example in the cosmological significance of poetry that rightly expands the significance of poetic metaphor from a communal myth to a cosmic myth. Therein, poetry brings its community into a profound contextualisation with the world as a cosmos. But as this further synthesis is a special case of community – a community of being, no less – it is not necessary to dedicate a separate chapter to its elucidation. The word “World” derives from the Old English combined word “weorold” “weor-old” signifying “man age” or “era, age or life of man.” (*OED*) The world is precisely a “world” to us because of its community of being. My conclusion will instead focus upon the silent negative space created by the mould constructed by the edifice of all preceding chapters, including this one.

This chapter will focus on the nature and condition of community as the penultimate act in a dialectical drama that aims to respond adequately to poetry as a mode of discourse. First I will argue that community not only exists *in potentia* in poetry but that poetry is not fully understood without its community. Secondly, I will explore what kind of community is relevant to poetry. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on the cognates of the poetic community, such as the mythic dimension. To identify that which is characteristic of community in poetry, I will turn to a related field that explicitly demonstrates the significance and participation of community in a single artistic act: the theatre.

Masks in the amphitheatre

The house-lights go down. There is a whisper of excitement throughout the theatre. Expectation hangs heavy in the air. What was a simple gathering, a mere aggregation of individuals and small groups of people talking amongst themselves, without any overall purpose except to be there, living parallel with each other but hardly intersecting at all, suddenly becomes an *audience*. This is such a common experience that it generally passes by unremarked. What makes them an “audience,” when a moment before they were just a disparate group? What distinguishes an audience from any other group of people? And what does this situation teach us about poetry? Is there a connection at all?

Peter Brook opens his book, *The Empty Space* with these words:

I can take any empty space and call it a stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.⁴

An audience is a group whose attention is specifically oriented towards – *watching*, *listening to* – the stage, the “empty space” where a play is performed. Each addressee points with his or her being, according to personal capability and situation, seeing the stage from slightly different positions in the auditorium, yes, but they are all one in intent. They are no longer unrelated or separate *individuals*, although they are not strictly a single entity. They are a unity as an audience but they are not unified into a single being. Each will interpret the play differently, possibly generating as many interpretations as there are people in the theatre. Yet their differences represent an essential aspect of being in the audience. An essential *distance* exists between audience and player and an equally essential *relation*. And these dimensions bring a community into being.

Certainly, a line exists dividing the auditorium, where the audience sits, from the stage – a line that Gregory Bateson called a “context marker”⁵ – creating a distinction between two

⁴ Peter Brook (1972) *The Empty Space*: 11.

⁵ Gregory Bateson (1973) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*: 261 ff.

entirely different categories of experience. There is, in short, a relative breach between audience and players that places each person into a clear situation defining the relationship between them. This relation both affirms and transcends the barrier that occurs in physical space between each category of experience. But each person requires the other in order to exist, that much we learnt above from Peter Brook. Without an audience, the players are no longer performing. The audience laughs and cries together, responds to the play, sits and judges but also enjoys. They deliberate upon the performance and its meaning. They ask whether it is meaningful to them. They bring all of their persons to the task or they are locked out of membership of the audience. Should some look on from the solidified distance of the objective observer, they are no longer members of the audience.

That is a situation which is clearly analogous to poetry. Indeed, poetry and the stage have often accompanied each other ever since the conception of Greece drama, sometime in the seventh century BC. Let me demonstrate what I mean by recalling the masks that have since become the very symbols for the theatre – tragedy and comedy: 🎭. The use of the mask occurred arguably at a time when the distinction between audience and stage, between the play as a work, itself distanced from the events it portrayed, was not so self-evident to its participants. The theatrical event was performed as a religious rite. Now, a religious rite re-enacts the event itself. Upon these events we might later meditate in prayer. But the theatre, which developed from certain religious rites linked to the god Dionysus, is far more ambiguous. The play is not exactly a repetition of the events portrayed. And yet the events are renewed before us as if time itself were circular. Peter Brook said:

A representation is the occasion when something is re-presented, when something from the past is shown again – something that once was, now is. For representation is not an imitation or description of a past event, a representation denies time. It abolishes that difference between yesterday and today. It takes yesterday's action and makes it live again in every one of its aspects – including its immediacy. In other words, a representation is what it claims to be – a making

present. We can see how this is the renewal of the life that repetition denies and it applies as much to rehearsal as to performance.⁶

The mask in Greek drama served to distance its audience from portrayed events, especially those too awful to be revealed in their graphic reality; the sacred and secret moments when blood-guilt is expiated. The mask entered the hidden sacred precinct beyond the stage space where these unbearable mysteries of *catharsis*, according to Else's interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*,⁷ were enacted – the murder of Agamemnon, Oedipus blinding himself, Jocasta's suicide, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Medea murdering her children – its eyes permanently open to witness the blood-rite's expiation, its mouth permanently open to testify to the community. It takes us beyond the curtain of daily experience and reveals that which cannot be encountered without madness or overwhelming horror, or without tainting the sacred with prosaic existence. Certainly this remains quite alien to the descriptive violence of modern cinema – which has certain consequences for modern theatre – whose diadem is mainly entertainment – the “wow” factor. Yes, it is possible to weep at the horror of Oedipus or Clytemnestra, but Greek drama as a religious rite strictly required reflection, perhaps prayer or meditation upon its mysteries. At least once, in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, the masked figure upon emerging from the sacred precinct refused to testify to the mysteries it had just witnessed. Theseus describes how Oedipus had commanded him “that no one may go near that place, /not a living voice invade that grave: /it's sacred, it's his everlasting rest.”⁸

No “living voice” entails the actor in the mask as much as the character of “Theseus.” Where normally the mask allowed for the speaking of these events, here the gods through Oedipus have forbidden it. This lacuna, in which testimony usually fills the gap, reveals through its absence the sacred values intrinsic to the mask, its permanently opened eyes to witness and its permanently opened mouth to testify. Its sacred duty is to convey the mysteries of the hidden *temenos* to its audience, thus bringing the audience into location with those mysteries. This

⁶ Peter Brook (1972) *The Empty Space*: 155.

⁷ Gerard Else (1957) *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*: 228-30.

⁸ Sophocles (1984) “Oedipus at Colonus” Tr. Robert Fagels: In 1980-83, 388.

became noticeable when the sacred duty entailed in exactly *not testifying* to what the masked character has just witnessed. Hegel said in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*:

In Greek drama it was what was spoken that was the main thing; the persons who acted retained a calm plastic attitude, and there was none of that mimic art, strictly so called, in which the face comes into play, but rather it was the spiritual element in the conceptions dramatised which produced the effect desired.⁹

Masks were only worn by the central characters in the drama. Beside them, members of the undifferentiated chorus go unmasked. They stand aside from events, sometimes passing commentary, often just reacting as we would react. The ritual component of the tragedy is performed by the chorus. This differentiation between character and chorus serves to identify the masked characters as the “heroes,” those who are marked by Fate – *αναγκη* – to contravene taboo, bringing disaster upon themselves, upon their family and descendents, and upon society as a whole. In Euripides’s *Bacchae*, the god Dionysus wears a mask, both to identify him as the god disguised as a Lydian stranger, but also to mask his features as him “who looks like woman”, known to the audience but not to the characters on stage.¹⁰ The chorus in this play is composed of his female Lydian devotees. This makes it clear the mask is essentially ambiguous in its making present, identifying the character on the one hand, while on the other, masking the true face of the actor and her or his character as well. That in particular bears considerable metaphorical force in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, wherein the real truth of Oedipus only comes to be known towards the end of the drama. Throughout the play, the audience is aware of the irony in Oedipus’s words and position as he sets out to *discover himself the murderer of Laius*, his predecessor and, as he will discover, his own father. The mask, therefore, both *discloses* and *covers*, just as it *is* and *is-not* the character acted or the actor acting. The mask both distantiates the audience from its character, and, through the mask as sole witness to the horror, distantiates the audience from those events. While in a contrary movement, it entails a relation

⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. (1895) *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Vol 2: 314.

¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 382.

with the character and with the events via the medium of its spoken testimony. These ambiguities are already familiar to us from the dynamics of poetic metaphor and for the same reasons, bring the person, like the reader, into a relation with the mystery of being.

The plays were always part of a ritual competition between the Athenian playwrights, their entries always composed of three interrelated tragedies and a Dionysian comedy, indicating their audience was called upon to decide the winner. More than merely a stylistic cliché of the Greek stage, the mask as the embodiment of distanciation and relation created the grounds for ethical and aesthetical deliberation by the audience. This central fact challenges the standard translation of the Aristotelian term *καθαρσις* as referring to a “purification of the emotions by vicarious experience.” (*OED*) As noted in my introduction, “catharsis” is generally understood to present Greek tragedy in the light of maintaining civic order through the exorcism of violent emotion in its audience.¹¹ It is the very existence of the masks which belies the fallacy at the heart of Aristotle’s supposed conception of *catharsis*. I say “supposed” because translating the ancient word presents us with considerable difficulty. It is not altogether certain the text of *The Poetics* that has come down to us represents the original penned by Aristotle and not some corrupted transcription, possibly even a poor summary. Gerard Else, in his translation and commentary on *The Poetics*, surmises the text has many corruptions that significantly alter its meaning. “Catharsis,” he tells us, should be thought of as the moment in the plot of a tragedy when the blood-guilt incurred from acts transgressing the divine-natural order is finally expiated. These are certainly terrible moments, it is true, but the masked figure as the intermediary between audience and event promotes a proper relation with the event, thereby short-circuiting any catharsis in the modern sense as it is supposed to affect its audience. This is *poetry* which points to dread events without the sort of “realistic” depiction that lays its audience agog and, therefore, unable to judge the work. Its mystery is thus not lost in the shadows cast by a sunstruck brutality. Without this veiling mask, the violence and despair of, for example,

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1988) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*: 32-33.

Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, becomes simply unbearable. That is, without the technique of presentation, tragedy would lay its audience horror-struck, literally overwhelming the audience with an external force beyond themselves: they would be *possessed*. When a person is possessed, his or her rational centres are voided. No deliberation is possible. Paul Tillich wrote:

In the state of demonic possession the mind is not really "beside itself," but rather it is in the power of elements of itself which aspire to be the whole mind, which grasp the centre of the rational self and destroy it.¹²

Blatant horror overwhelms an audience. Horror films in their modern incarnation serve purely as entertainment. They *divert* the self from itself. But Greek tragedy brings the self *back to itself* in an audience of persons. The use of the mask thus enables the infusion of rational debate and deliberation between persons fully themselves. That is a form of community that does not sink the person into a singular whole, removing all personal difference. We would be condemned to such a voidance of difference should the postmodernist presumptions of social collectivity triumph. But the mask, just like the poem, grasps a different form of collectivity from the anonymity of the conventional herd. This community begins with the personal voice and lets its participants be themselves; indeed, brings them to themselves. That is the secret of the mask and poets are its modern inheritors. Although we belong to an audience as a communal entity, we are encouraged to be ourselves as members of that community. This simply entails the notion of community as a *personal* society in which the *person* must stand in her or his exclusivity in order to establish authentic relation between *persons* as its fundamental attribution.

Community and collectivity

In the very act of *pointing-towards*, the poem takes a first step in the direction of building a community like the audience of theatre. The moment we enter into relation with the poem, we make that community possible. But unlike the community of the theatre's audience, the community of the poem need neither be gathered in a single place nor restricted to a particular time period. The life of a poem gathers to it a community of readers, without imposing any mode

¹²Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1: 126-7.

of obedience. Poetic community manifests most clearly in speaking from the situation of pointing-towards poetic mystery, speaking to another from the centre of the poetic circle. When another person speaks from that centre to another person, though the words will be her or his, nevertheless a community comes into being. Poetry enables the creation of community and lets it endure.

The postmodernist fallacy concerning the decentralisation of the speaking voice results from a vague, undefined notion of the word “community”. They fail to differentiate different modes by which the group manifests in society. I wish to draw once more upon the thought of Martin Buber to underline the type of social situation that is made possible by the poem. This will be compared with the pioneering social theory of Ferdinand Tönnies, from which Buber developed his thinking, and with Josiah Royce’s equivalent conception of community, Royce having spent most of his philosophical career trying to define its nature.¹³

Buber calls our attention to the essential difference between the “collective” (*kollektiv*) and its antonym in “community” (*gemeinschaft*).¹⁴ The two are not synonymous but contrast in an equivalence to Buber’s most famous contrasting pair, the *It* and the *Thou*, upon which collectivity and community are respectively based. Collectivity and community represent the projection of the *It* and *Thou* upon social relations as products of the inter-human, rather than sociological constructs. This will become clear when we compare Buber’s conceptions with those posited by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, whose work certainly influenced the early Buber.¹⁵ In those conceptions we will become aware of possibilities of potential community in poetry.

Any *collectivity* is an aggregation of individuals, either as a unified society, where the person is devalued to another voice in a chanting crowd, or as a mere collection of unconnected individuals, perhaps for a particular purpose where that purpose overrides their personal value

¹³ Joseph L. Blau (1956) “Royce’s Theory of Community”: 93.

¹⁴ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 31.

¹⁵ Robert Welsch (1967) “Buber’s Political Philosophy” in Paul Arthur Schilpp & Maurice Friedman eds. *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*: 437.

except as another one for the *cause*. The collective is not a “binding but a bundling together: individuals packed together, armed and equipped in common, with only as much life from man to man as will inflame the marching step.”¹⁶ One pictures the young men marching mechanically in line, portrayed in Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi-propaganda film *The Triumph of the Will*, contemporary with Martin Buber’s collection of essays written between 1925 and 1938, *Between Man and Man*. The individual, if one can even speak of an “individual” as such, is made a product of the collective will, thereby abrogating all personal responsibility: “The collectivity becomes what really exists, the person becomes derivatory. In every realm which joins him to the whole he is excused a personal response.”¹⁷ This is the social group to which the postmodernists condemn us by the expedient of abolishing the personal voice and converting the centre to a *function*, not a being.

Community, on the other hand, is diametrically opposed to collectivity. It arises not as a gathering of “individuals”, but as a meeting of “persons”, each of whom is an exclusive self, a *Thou* in Buber’s terminology, united through their mutual relations with one another:

[C]ommunity, growing community [...] is being no longer side by side but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it also moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the other, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*. Community is where community happens.¹⁸

We are told that a collectivity is an “organized atrophy of personal existence,” whereas a community is based on its “increase and confirmation in life towards one another.” Certainly community can be characterized as *organic*, in the sense of emerging from the authentic relations between persons confirming each person in his or her own personhood, not primarily as a member of a particular group. Collectivity maintains its functionalistic origin in eliminating the personhood of those individuals who comprise it. Its primary focus is either upon the group, with the individual merely a member of a collective identity, or upon the individual, with the group

¹⁶ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 31.

¹⁷ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 80.

¹⁸ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 31.

defined as a mere collection of individuals. The former operates on a person-denying oppressive order; the latter a mere aggregate of non-relating individuals. In either case, all personhood has been abolished in favour of collectivity or reduced to mere individuality.

The distinction of community/collectivity is, in many respects, not new with Buber for its similarity to Ferdinand Tönnies' sociological conceptions of "gemeinschaft" – as for Buber, translated into English by "community" – and "gesellschaft" – translated by "society" or by "association" – enunciated in his groundbreaking work, *Community and Association* of 1887. Nor will Buber be the last in using similar distinctions. Jürgen Habermas' hermeneutic distinction between a *mechanistic-structure* (as in, for example, bureaucracy) and the *Life-world*, organic and personal, belongs to the same lineage of Buber and Tönnies. How Tönnies' ideas influenced but also contrast with Buber's provides considerable insight into the nature of Buber's conception of community and of the collective.

Tönnies describes *Gemeinschaft* as the "real and organic life" of the relationship of human wills, whereas *Gesellschaft* is the "imaginary and mechanical structure" of the relationship of human wills.¹⁹ The former is typified in the "intimate, private, and exclusive living together," of our private lives with each other; the latter marks our public life: "It is the world itself." These are identified thus by Tönnies:

In *Gemeinschaft* (community) with one's family, one lives from birth on bound to it in weal and woe. One goes into *Gesellschaft* (society) as one goes into a strange country. A young man is warned against bad *Gesellschaft* (society), but the expression bad *Gemeinschaft* (community) violates the meaning of the word. [...] A *Gesellschaft* (society) of life would be a contradiction in and of itself. One keeps and enjoys another's *Gesellschaft* (society or company) but not his *Gemeinschaft* (community) in this sense.²⁰

Afterwards, Tönnies generalized about his sociological distinction: "In the most general way, one could speak of a *Gemeinschaft* (community) comprising the whole of mankind, such as

¹⁹ Ferdinand Tönnies (1955) *Community and Association*: 37.

²⁰ Ferdinand Tönnies (1955) *Community and Association*: 38.

the church wishes to be regarded. But human Gesellschaft (society) is conceived as mere coexistence of people independent of each other.”²¹

Certainly Tönnies conceives of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in terms that bear significant similarities to Buber’s dichotomy of community (*Gemeinschaft*) and collective (*kollektiv*). But in their spirit, they are worlds apart. Buber does not restrict his idea of community to any particular sphere of life. It might become established in any arena of inter-human discourse, public or private. Clearly, Tönnies restricts community to the intimacy of the family. However, families can just as easily be collectives as true communities. And society can become a community rather than merely remaining a collective, albeit rarely in a world of mass-society. Collectivity need not be limited purely to the public sphere but might be imposed upon our most intimate relationships in which intimacy itself might be a mask hiding a complete lack of relation:

There a lover stamps around and is in love only with his passion. There one is wearing his differentiated feelings like medal-ribbons. There one is enjoying the adventures of his own fascinating effect. There one is gazing enraptured at the spectacle of his own supposed surrender. There one is collecting excitement. There one is displaying his “power”. There one is preening himself with borrowed vitality. There one is delighting to exist simultaneously as himself and as an idol very unlike himself. There one is warming himself at the blaze of what has fallen to his lot. There one is experimenting. And so on and on – all the manifold monologists with their mirrors, in the apartment of the most intimate dialogue!²²

The step made by Tönnies in identifying community and association with particular social entities – e.g., the private family and the public political association – might be entirely reasonable in its assertions but it need not be substantively true in the inter-human sphere as understood by Martin Buber. That is a step Tönnies did not take. Although it is clear just how influential Tönnies has been in informing the thought of many thinkers, including Buber, Tönnies’ emphasis on the sociological sphere rather than the inter-human, dictates his preference

²¹ Ferdinand Tönnies (1955) *Community and Association*: 38.

²² Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 29-30.

for identifications that remain a convenient shorthand for the characteristics of particular social institutions – industrial unions, for example, or the family. In understanding the nature of inter-human relationships, even on a social scale, Buber enunciates an ethics of the inter-human, in a way that is well beyond the objective categories of Tönnies' sociology.

Another conception of community that bears some similarity to Buber is that of Josiah Royce, who we have had occasion to discuss in previous chapters. Royce's theory of community frames, and is framed by, his philosophy of loyalty, describing loyalty as *devoted love to a community*.²³ Royce was deeply influenced by German idealism and it is likely that he, too, was familiar with Tönnies' groundbreaking work.

According to Royce, a community is a social group that arises in time as a product of a coherent social evolution in history.²⁴ Not just any social group can be defined as a community. If one deals specifically with social processes over short periods of time – an hour, a day or a year – what is likely to result, says Royce, is chiefly a loose aggregation of individuals independent of one another, or the confused activity of a crowd. Royce's concept here bears direct comparison with Buber's notion of the collective. Royce wrote:

In an excited crowd, or in any assembly of the type of a mob, even the mature man is often much more aware of the feelings of other people than he is of his own. He often, in such cases, loses sight of himself in a certain passion of sympathy. And again, when at present we converse with people, we become conscious of their inner life rather in terms of their contrast with ourselves, than by means of their analogy with us.²⁵

A *crowd*, either an ugly mob or even a friendly picnic gathering, cannot be deemed a community, for, as Royce sees it, though it might have a mind it has “no institutions, no organization, no coherent unity, no history, no traditions.”²⁶ The crowd might appear as a single unit but represents what William James identified by a simple mixture of various minds, “a sort

²³ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 351.

²⁴ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 360.

²⁵ Josiah Royce (1959) *The World and the Individual: Vol. 2 Nature, Man and the Moral Order*: 171.

²⁶ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 361.

of mystical loss of personality on the part of its members.”²⁷ Similar to the crowd is the *group* – independent consumers at a supermarket or people on the street – each concerned only with his or her own situation. Between them there might be gossip, but gossip, Royce tells us, is not an act that establishes a community because gossip has no long-term consequences, barely passing beyond its moment.

For Royce, a community represents a product of an historical process over time, thus transcending the momentary impulse giving it birth. Although its history might remain largely unconscious to its inhabitants, a community has both a past and a future. Whether its past is conceived as a “real” or an ideal history, its history lies integral to its very essence which is “aided in its consciousness by a memory.”²⁸ The social unity of the community thus requires a lengthy process that has occurred or supposed to have occurred: The wealthier the memory, the richer the basis for its interactions. For Royce, the builder of the community is clearly its history, an idea revealing the influence of the most eminent German Idealist, Hegel:

[T]he idea of the community is also an idea which is impressed upon us whenever we make a sufficiently successful and fruitful effort to interpret the sense, the coherent interest, and the value of the relations in which a great number of different selves stand to the past.²⁹

Royce’s very definition of community rests upon the sense and destiny that belong to the collective past and to the conception of its future. In chapter one, “On Incompleteness”, we alluded to Royce’s *community of interpretation* making interpretation of meaning possible.³⁰ The triadic form central to Royce’s conception of community incorporates the three persons of the person whose thought is to be interpreted, the person who is interpreter, and the person for whom the interpretation is made.³¹ The threefold community aims towards an ideal unity of insight, rather similar to Gadamer’s “unity of horizons”, a mediation enabling understanding to be

²⁷ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 361.

²⁸ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 361.

²⁹ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 364.

³⁰ Gabriel Marcel (1956b) *Royce’s Metaphysics*: 21-22.

³¹ Gabriel Marcel (1956b) *Royce’s Metaphysics*: 125.

embarked upon and resolved through membership of the *spiritual body* of the community.³² Thought, therefore, for Royce, calls forth intrinsic community from the moment of its communication. The variety of selves who comprise this “spiritual body” does not disappear into the homogeneity of the crowd, but remains in all its distinct variety. Whatever motivates each member stays assigned to each and “may vary from self to self in the most manifold fashion.”³³ The first condition for a community, that a person has the power to project his or her life over time, derives from the principle that “the self is no mere datum, but is in essence a life which is *interpreted*, and which *interprets* itself.”³⁴ Royce offers up this hermeneutic conception of the personal life as a means of bridging communal history and personal experience.

Royce’s historical and institutional community provides the greatest contrast with Martin Buber’s conception of community. What is most important for Buber is the mutual relations between community members, relationships that might occur as a happening without a history as such. Certainly, Royce explains the *communication* between members is dependent upon the *second* important condition for community: the existence in the society of a number of distinct selves able to communicate and generally engaged in such activities.³⁵ Clearly Royce and Buber reach some sort of agreement on this point even when their presumptions differ so markedly. Royce, throughout, has assumed the Christian church as his model of community. There is merit in doing so. Yet it limits his understanding to a particular community that might not reflect all communities as such. On the other hand, Royce’s dependence on history, real or ideal, points to certain discourse acting to ground a community. This discourse opens a way to include poetry. Also, the hermeneutic of the personal triadic community also makes room for poetry but it is certainly true that Royce’s community of interpretation speaks to all interpersonal thought and not merely to poetry. The conception of the poetic community is clearly not the sole mode of discursive community; to claim so would be cavalier indeed. How poetry connects to community

³² Gabriel Marcel (1956b) *Royce’s Metaphysics*: 125.

³³ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 370.

³⁴ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 371. Italics: CJW.

³⁵ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 373.

will form the topic of the next section. On the question of the collective, both Royce and Buber are in considerable agreement.

We recognize the ethical dimension in the way both Buber and Royce characterize the social in terms of the interhuman. But even more so, we also begin to grasp the influence of Kierkegaard's ethical stage – “choose yourself” – lying at the heart of community, whereas that moment is impossible while the individual remains immured inside a collective. In the collective, there is nothing personal. It represents the formation of the impersonal in our social relations, no matter in what arena this occurs. It goes without saying that the *person* is not likely to come into existence within such a regime; though not probable. The self will be but a little bit of the self masquerading as a full self – at its worst, “possessed” in the way identified by Paul Tillich, in which the individual is possessed by an external power that voids all personhood to be replaced by justifications only sanctioned by the powerful.³⁶ This might be characterized by Nietzsche's pejorative of “the herd.”³⁷ How different from a community in which the personal and the person are brought to a decisive existence in their exclusivity, as profoundly confirming, as it comes into being at the ethical stage of “choosing yourself.” However, that does not imply all persons are in agreement as if a community constitutes a homogeneous whole. The life of dialogue in a community does not dictate common agreement:

It must, of course, be added that the community to which a man belongs does not usually express in a unified and unambiguous way what it considers to be right and what not right in a given situation. It consists of more or less visible groups, which yield to a man interpretations of destiny and of his task which are utterly different yet all alike claim absolute authenticity. Each knows what benefits the community, each claims your unreserved complicity for the good of the community.³⁸

We leave “common agreement” to the life of the collective where all voices are reduced to a single voice chanting slogans authorized by the collective powers, where the personal voice

³⁶ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 143.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche (1969) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: e.g. 88.

³⁸ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 67.

has no authorization to speak for itself. But already we can see just how much the characterization of community bears comparison with the openness of interpretation in the poem. Community becomes a possibility in the poem, when the personal voice of a poet resonates for a group of people, open to a mutual relationship with the others of the group, allowing that group to perdure in space and time. A poem appears as the centre around which a community of persons might develop.

The community of the poem

The poem, with which a reader enters into a living relation, becomes the *living centre* upon which a community is made possible. This sense of community makes itself apparent first through the on-going generation of interpretations that *point towards*, as the reader affirms, the mystery at its focus. In *I and Thou* Martin Buber sets forth the situation of the community properly so-called in terms that are particularly pertinent to poetry:

The true community does not arise through peoples having feelings for one another (though indeed not without it), but through, first, their taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Centre, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with one another. The second has its source in the first, but is not given when the first alone is given. [...] The community is built up out of living mutual relations, but the builder is the living effective centre.³⁹

No doubt Buber is referring to the theological living centre of God, a profound mystery in Himself, but another living effective and mysterious centre is also to be found in the living relation with the poem. However, my claims for poetry are much more modest than those for a theological community. The community need not be particularly large but poetry provides a possibility for its establishment nevertheless.

Royce argued for his notion of a community of interpretation as based upon the profound relation that arises when someone speaks an original thought or in an original way. In that sense, his words are particularly pertinent to poetry:

³⁹ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 45.

A man who expresses himself in a way that is new to me, seems to me often all the more real person, with an inner life of his own, just because I fail to trace any close analogy between his meanings or his expressions and my own. His difference from me makes him more real to me. Thus the truly original poet, the Shakespeare or the Goethe, seems to us, as we study him, to possess his own wondrous inner life, just because, while we read him, we meet novelty.⁴⁰

Wherever we journey, it seems that we tread in the footsteps of Northrop Frye, although our emphases are certainly different, for wherever we go his feet have traversed the same territory. Frye will continue to play a formative role in this chapter, especially when we return to reconsider kerygma within the communal situation. Frye described how the poem is a focus of a community, like its linguistic cousin rhetoric, but unlike rhetoric, instead of demanding uniformity of response, the poem encourages variety.⁴¹ Even when the passage of time brings about a greater degree of consensus, says Frye, this flexibility remains. However, in order to identify how poetry actually brings about a community, we need to begin with the poet's originary creative vocation that brought the poem into being, because it is there that the possibility of community is already made manifest.

Potential community begins the moment the poet says *Thou* in calling the poem forth. Around this central act of creative vocation, the potential for true community arises with the poem as its focus when the poem is made a living centre. Of course, this is not the only way by which a community *qua* community comes into being. Wherever *Thou* is said in its truth, there community is invited. What distinguishes poetry from other modes of written and spoken speech is the perduring inscription of possible community within its very speaking. That does not mean there can be no community of, for example, science which opts for a very different mode of speech. But that community arises not as a consequence of its speech but as a result of its creative and collective endeavour, those dimensions of its collective being removed from its scientific papers or treatises because they contravene the subject/object distinction. Community

⁴⁰ Josiah Royce. *Nature, Man and the Moral Order*: 171.

⁴¹ Northrop Frye (1990) *Words of Power*: 67.

is extrinsic to science's chosen modes of expression whereas community, as a very real possibility, is intrinsic to poetic expression because the poem proceeds unhindered, directly from its creative vocation. The necessities of proof burden scientific papers in a very particular way by distancing the works from the impulse of their original creative vocation. This does not make scientific papers less creative, they simply revoke any acknowledgement of their origin in creative vocation. Because the words in a poem are called forth directly within creative vocation as a saying of *Thou*, though no doubt they will be subject to an editing process, the words present the relation itself, not speech modified following the event to expunge any reference to so-called "subjectivities" as does science. The words in a poem might be edited – editing is an important part of the craft of all writing – but where editing occurs in poetry it will be according to whether the words point true. That does not make science any the less true, only its truth is vastly different from the truth of poetry. The truth of poetry is its truth of relation and that truth provides an affirmational focus upon which community is made possible. Indeed, the poem invites community. In this way a poem might become a living centre. And in becoming the living centre for a community, its words are raised into a greater context thereby rendering its metaphors ground for the *mythological*. For just as a poem entails the potential of a perduring community, it is itself raised by community to a new breadth of being meaningful. Community and the truth of the poem form an essential symbiosis. The living centre reaches out to the community focused upon it. Through poetry, community is able to *point-towards* in truth as mystery.

As we have seen, the dimensions necessary for the creation of a community are outlined by Martin Buber as essentially twofold: first, the "living mutual relation with a living Centre" – that which is the *builder* of the living community – and, second, the participants being in a "living mutual relation with one another" – the living community is *built* from mutual relations.⁴² Given the affirmational depths of its poetic mystery, the living effective centre that is the builder

⁴² Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 45.

of a community is to be found in the relation with the poem, itself a relation. The primary dimension for the creation of a community is fulfilled in the living relation of a reader with the poem, and as the poem speaks to the reader, so it speaks to a community of readers. What person would not need to communicate the poem which is meaningful to him or her with others? The living centre of communion – “community” presumes the living relation expressed by the word “communion” – is already there in the reader’s relation with the poem, just as it was there in the poet’s creative vocation that called the poem forth – the creative vocation that *is* the poem.

But more than communion, which after all can pass by in silence, is the spoken word that opens a way to the depths of the mystery. The poem speaks this mystery at the heart of an existence and sets forth the *between*, sets forth in the *Word* the space between the mystery of an existence and the mystery in the poet. Wherever immediate and direct relationships occur between a poet and existence such that the *word* is spoken, “where the dungeon of the person is unbarred and men become freely open toward one another,”⁴³ – the words come from Buber’s early work on the religious community – therein community is invited to become concrete because the poem is the *word* speaking the *between* which appeals to the relation between persons. It is a commonplace that poetry is written for eyes and ears other than the poet’s. From its origin, all poetic art is essentially of the nature of dialogue.⁴⁴ The poem steps forth as genuine speech when it makes visible that which is invisible, speaks that which is silent, enunciates that which is ineffable, discloses that which lies undisclosed, and speaks it to another. This is not knowledge that binds people into some superhuman entity, even if we call it a “community”, for that which assumes itself to be “superhuman” denies all personal potential and can only be a collective properly so-called. No, the poem appeals to the person who reads it and is personal. This is the nature of a community, any community: an opening in the personal space between persons, such that they hearken to one another as persons – confirming each as fully a person.

⁴³ Martin Buber (1967) “Der heilige Weg: Ein Wort an die Juden und an die Voelker” q. by Hugo Bergman. (1967) “Martin Buber and Mysticism” in Paul Arthur Schilpp & Maurice Friedman eds. *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*: 302.

⁴⁴ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 25.

But perhaps more significantly, the poem in entering the community as its vocational builder, becomes the medium by which persons in a community might enter into dialogue with one another. The word, speaking “*Thou*” from one to another, provides the existential scaffolding for bridging the distance between people. The poem emerges as the medium of the *between* that calls forth a response from each person. And in responding, each one assumes his or her responsibility: dialogue commences as an ethical movement. Buber identifies the root of responsibility in “response” thus acknowledging the ethical nature of dialogue. In the last theory chapter, a connection was made between Aristotelian deliberation and the poem to indicate the relation between poetry and virtue ethics. Here the very response of persons to poetry in the life of a community emphasizes the *situational ethics* of dialogue. The poem that assumes the place of the between creates the potential for dialogue. Dialogue will only occur when each person arises in his or her exclusivity in response. But it is also true that dialogue brings about the person in his exclusivity. This is an essential plank in Buber’s dialogical ethics. Poetry can play a significant role in such a dialogical ethics.

As a medium for the between, the poem can be shown to be the living centre of a community in its role of builder of the community. Every true poem thus stands for a nascent community *in potentia*, awaiting its readership to bring a community into reality. The mutual relations between people will constitute the community but poetry, as its living centre, provides the impetus and medium by which that community will come about and endure.

When we extend that community to include our relations with the natural world and its beings, allowing poetry to act as the builder even there, then a *community of being* has been created. Therein, an ecological ethics might be made manifest by a *poetics of ecology*, the initial impetus to this project. Just as a community of persons is made possible from the moment poetic relation emerges into actuality, so a community of being is made possible with the creation of a community of persons. Everything stems from the primary relation called forth in a poem by the poet. While Buber indicated it was always wrong to limit the *Thou* to just human beings, as his

discussion concerning the relation with a tree in *I and Thou* certainly reveals,⁴⁵ it is as equally wrong to limit community to human beings alone. We live in relation with the whole world and its denizens. Poetry discloses the fundamental quality of human existence in our ability to bring together communities of being. That is grasped by the lines attributed to Hölderlin,⁴⁶ so important to Martin Heidegger:

Full of merit, yet poetically, man
Dwells on this earth.⁴⁷

“Poetically, man /dwells on this earth.” This may seem a very strange conclusion to reach given current overwhelming technology, alienating human beings from one another and from the natural world in which we live, but the conclusion is something to which poetry points-towards with the accuracy and comprehension of its pointing true. Poetry is not in this sense a technology of language, although there is technique in it, but the way in which language transcends mere technology and reaches out towards other being – indeed, *grasps* the mystery of other being, giving voice to (calling forth) the mystery of being through the mystery of poetic metaphor. And therein arises potential for a community of being.

Commonsense tells us that society gives rise to literature and it is certainly true that literature is a product boasting its necessary contexts in social discourses. These are the normative processes of text production. It, therefore, comes as a surprise to realize how poetry as an origin of the personal speaking voice acts as a builder for a community. That is a reversal of normative processes and seemingly counter-intuitive. Community, as opposed to a collective, is likely to be a very fragile social order – in contradistinction to Josiah Royce’s desire for an historically certainty to community – that cannot be willed into place like its collective cousin. Collectivity, like any association of individuals, can be instituted as soon as it is necessary “to organize”. But a community cannot be instituted in this way, arising as it does from the charisma

⁴⁵ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 7-8.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Bate explains how the novel *Phaeton* by Wilhelm Waiblinger, an admirer of Hölderlin, contained the lines that were recast as poetry by Ludwig von Pigenot in the style of Hölderlin. See Bate, Jonathan. (2001) *The Song of the Earth*: 258-9.

⁴⁷ q. in Martin Heidegger. (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*: 216.

of the moment to transcend itself and persons coming together in mutuality. Collectivity can only replicate a surface likeness of mutuality by instituting a strict egalitarianism where all are “considered equal” but it is far from the desired mutuality. Like community, poetry is not a product of willed rules, no matter how much the academy wished it were, but an accomplishment of the charisma in the poet’s vocation. Neither poetry nor community can be willed as a structure. This makes both exceedingly fragile but also immensely strong when they do come to fruition. The Living Centre serving as both origin and builder of community indeed might be a poem precisely because it reflects its vocational birth in the spontaneous, dialogical moment. Thus the reversal is a very specific case in which the mutuality of relation in a community finds its medium for the mutual relation between persons in poetic mystery. This means there is an infinite depth of meaning to the relation that binds the community, giving it resonance and rendering it meaningful between person and person.

When I speak of the poem as *origin* and *builder* of a community, I am not referring to poetry as a whole acting on a community at any one time. Were this to be the case, then I should be attempting to outline an archetypal criticism. That is, I would be aiming to identify those archetypes that are the effective symbols of poetry as a genre in terms of its collective function in society. One would look to something like Northrop Frye’s *theory of symbols* to perform such a task.⁴⁸ My main focus, however, remains centred upon the effective power of the poem and its particular vocational ground relating to the mystery at its core. This does not exclude the presence of conventional symbols. On the contrary, archetypes are actuated in, and through, all creative work as essential modes of collaboration with, and rebellion against, historical discourses, against which the particular poem stands in tension, stands in its essence as dialogue. Many archetypes will play out through the work in ways that are unacknowledged by poet or community. This does not, however, necessarily provide the justification for belief in the “collective unconscious” posited by Carl Jung.

⁴⁸ Northrop Frye (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism*: 95-115.

Words of loyalty

The poem taken up into community as a builder, becomes the *word* that is spoken from person to person, thus establishing its ontological mystery within their between. This has profound implications for the relationships between people in the community. Because of the poem's metaphoric mystery, the reader is called forth as a person whose own mystery is acknowledged through the affirmation of the mystery of the poem. The community of the poem, like all true community, stirs each one in a vocational movement that is a dialogue precisely based on the creative vocation of the poet. Unlike the forms of traditional rhetoric, which seek to *persuade* thus qualifying and restricting its collective participants – persuasion being a form of restriction by enticing a particular *point of view* – the vocation of the poem in community serves as a vocation for each person to step forth, each in his or her own exclusivity for each other. The poem creates an opening for what Martin Buber calls an “essential relation”⁴⁹ between persons, just as it did for the poet and for the reader. In other words, the persons of the poetic community are presences for one another, because the mystery of the poem appeals to, and opens a path to, the mystery in each person. That is a primary enactment of the poetic word.

As both the builder and the medium for a community, the poem acts as the *word* spoken from person to person. The poem, as a result, necessarily enriches all communication between the persons of the community. The poetic *word* acts in exactly the way the open-mouth of the ancient Greek mask testified to what its always-open eyes witnessed, for once it was spoken in the theatre, its audience then possessed the word to communicate with each other. Therefore, the poetic word becomes the medium for the propagation of a community, entering and enriching the relations between its members. Where a mere gathering of people existed before, now the poetic word binds the people together into a community, a community that might exist not only at a single moment but endure across time. The most successful literary works have been at the heart

⁴⁹ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 170.

of communities for thousands of years, *The Bible* being a notable example, Homer for the Greeks, and *The Kalevala* for the Finns of Karelia.

Faith, with its attendant doubt, and the meaningful affirmation the reader makes in his or her poetic appreciation, also builds another mode of faith: Faith in the community. Within a community, the faith in the poem and its relation is taken up into the relationships between people. It is here that we begin to speak of *loyalty* – *loyalty* to other persons, *loyalty* to the community.

Like faith, there is an ever-present implicit negative which serves to make our loyalty step forward ahead of its negation in a dialectical movement reaching further and further into understanding of the other person. That negative element is a lingering *distrust*, that which expresses human finitude in a communal situation. Without distrust, loyalty becomes *absolute*, serving to deny that which is exclusively personal in other people by *deifying them*. Absolute loyalty's fulfilment has already been predetermined. But the faith in poetic mystery to unlock the mystery of the other person as well as the *Thou* of the poem, invites loyalty to that person as a person. And to be loyal to the community, of which each person is a vital member. Indeed, Josiah Royce defined "loyalty" as *devoted love to a community*.⁵⁰ There is a great fragility to this, because qualm and distrust continue to be present. These are, like the dialectic of faith and doubt, an expression of human finitude. But the great perduring strength of a community derives from the very presence of negativity as an organic dialectical component that promotes distance in order to give space for relation on a communal scale, thereby granting to the members of the poetic community their own exclusivity as whole persons. And with the ability to set the community as a whole before them. In this way each person is not only a member of the community but has the ability to hold that community over against them and thereby acknowledge their membership.

⁵⁰ John K. Roth ed. (1972) *The Philosophy of Josiah Royce*: 351.

This is quite different from the rule of assertion that is the hallmark of a collectivity. An affirmation is something that we make with the whole person; an assertion is only made by part of the person. Those who construct their religion solely within the realm of assertion – as many fundamentalists do today, including the “new atheists” Karen Armstrong identifies as fundamentalist as the religious fundamentalism against which their diatribes are aimed⁵¹ – belong purely to a collectivity without recourse to the deeper humanity of fellow members. Indeed, members cannot be whole persons at all under this regime. Whatever membership is granted, it is based solely upon obedience to a certain “belief” or a catechism – often chanted as a mendicant to chaos and uncertainty. If a community is forthcoming, it arises in spite of the professed beliefs of its participants. True faith admits doubt and dissent as it does belief. An affirmation is, like faith, a plumbing of the depths to the core of the mystery. And also like faith, an affirmation exists within the dialectic of doubt. Faith and doubt in the full relation with the poem, that we identified as the “yes” and “no” pertaining to the poetic metaphor’s literary *Is* and implicit literal *Is-not* projected onto the relational field, belong now to the community as *loyalty* and *distrust*. Just as faith goes ever deeper, thanks to its recurring doubt, the status of poetic faith encourages loyalty in the others of the community by enriching the relation between them. Faith in the poem’s mystery, towards which it points, allows each person to take a stand within an affirmation of the mystery, without binding them to any particular assertion because every assertion derived from the poem is accompanied by doubt. This I describe as a dialectic in terms of the necessary co-existence of opposites in tension with each other. But the co-existence of a thought and its negative in the same figure is critical because it enables distantiation and relation with the community for each participant. The binding of the poetic community is person to person, hence the transposition of faith to loyalty. No binding perdurance arises as a concomitant of a belief in an assertion. The poem builds its community but doesn’t tie members to a dogma or set of dogmas. Mystery is meaningful and is far from being limited to any one particular

⁵¹ Karen Armstrong (2009) *The Case for God*: 290 ff.

interpretative signification. The community has this mystery, the poetic mystery of the word, as its origin, its medium and as its builder.

It is inevitable that culture will act as the medium to bind or divide people. Culture is usually described in the light of structuralist theories of signs and the juxtaposition of oppositional terms, a modern scientific development of the ancient discipline of rhetoric: its ontology is “*either this or that*”. But it is a static juxtaposition of opposites that allows for no dialectical movement, thereby denying dynamic access to deeper ontologies. That static juxtaposition enforces the aegis of the assertion, a realm in which modern science reigns supreme – structuralism did, after all, sprout from the science of linguistics. Within these narrow limitations, it must indeed be constructive to valorise science because science upholds the validation of its assertions. An assertion without testing against reality might easily give rise to fictive dogmas. It is not poetry which incorporates the possibility for dogma. Science mitigates the rule of empty assertion by exhaustively testing its assertions against reality. Unfortunately, the reality against which it tests its assertions is also the product of scientific perception and thus even science cannot overcome its intrinsic self-recursive hermeneutic. This becomes particularly fraught when the testing of a very narrow assertion runs the risk of falsifying any generalizations won from this scientific endeavour. However, limiting our social discourse to an assertional debate fails to respect the affirmation that arises in a super-assertional mode of being similar to Gabriel Marcel’s idea of the “metaproblematical”.⁵² Indeed, those institutional affirmations – such as taking an oath in a court of law or making a marriage vow in church – are recognized as necessary to the *function* of assertional society and are justified in just these terms. But many of these “affirmations” provide barely a modicum of interpersonal commitment, particularly as they are asserted on the grounds of the social weight of the institution in which they are made. It seems even an asserted collectivity needs to have at least the pretence of an affirmation in order to function properly. Such an “affirmation” has been usurped by a secondary semiotic system in

⁵² Gabriel Marcel (1956a) “On the Ontological Mystery”: 22.

precisely that manner described by Roland Barthes in his idiosyncratic conception of “myth”.⁵³ The evidence of uniformity must be maintained even when certain aspects of statement need to be appraised at a secondary level in order for the dominant primary assertional plane to be continually justified. It is important the assertion, while it remains the dominant forum for culture, be continually arraigned against extra-assertional reality to remind us of its essential limits. But a world without the sort of affirmation made possible by poetic mystery, is a world that rings hollow precisely because it has become divorced, not from the reality of assertional truth, but from the depths of mystery itself – the depths that underpin and make meaningful all of its multifaceted hermeneutics. Too often narrow scientific assertions are taken out of their restricted contexts and made the declaration justifying a certain political or economic agenda. One can see this particularly in the reductive model that underlies much scientific explanation. In the assertional universe, the reductive model claims each lower plane of explanation will be simpler, with fewer and fewer interacting categories, till finally we have the proverbial “Theory of Everything” formulae that can be “written on a T-shirt.” Yet the situation is very different for anything beyond the most basic institutional machinery. As the quantum physicists reveal, the “lower” planes of explanation prove more mysterious, paradoxical and stranger the deeper they penetrate them. Consequently, the superstring theorists, who claim to be near that proverbial T-shirt formula, must propose something like 11 spatial dimensions – rather than the conventional 3 or Einstein’s 4 dimensions – to come even close to sustaining a satisfactory assertional model. In short, assertion’s reign has brought us to the threshold of a realm that appears for all the world like a kind of poetry. Strangely, the deeper the assertional model attempts to go in physical being, the more poetic it becomes; even down to the terms it uses to describe its elements – for example, the names for the “quarks”, itself a literary reference to James Joyce, represent a particularly potent set of poetical terms. *Schrödinger’s cat* paradox, as another example, contains the simultaneous “yes” and “no”, for all the world like a type of poetic metaphor.

⁵³ Roland Barthes (1972) “Myth Today.”

The poetic community does not need to reconnect with the personal world because it never left that world. Being therein will not be restricted to the simulacra of assertions. Indeed the poetic community is more than a binding of people – though that is one of its greatest benefits – it is a binding in a community of being. That is why religious communities hold “sacred” texts consisting of poetry. It is possible science – the master of assertion – will need to generate forms more akin to poetry in order to situate us properly in its world. Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* series for television represents just such a poetry of science. The attitude that says poetry begins in the *fictive* space – or to be more accurate, a “virtual space”⁵⁴ or “fantasy”⁵⁵ – fails to comprehend that which is poetry’s secret. Because it is concluded that all justifiable descriptions of the world are assertional in character, especially assertional in the manner of science, therefore poetry, which somehow is not assertional in the form of a simple semantics, must according to this logic, be the product of fictive states without proper connection to reality. That assumes that whatever disengages and distantiates itself actually *negates* that from which it is disengaged. But identifying disengagement with a pure negation acts to universalise that which is essentially a dialectical relativity. The assumption that the scientific assertion is the only true connection with reality, since it is constantly tested against reality, is at best breathtakingly naïve, at worst incredibly arrogant. It makes absolute the dominance of science without recourse to alternative ways of relating with the world. I am not advocating the rejection of science and all that it provides, merely pleading for a broader, more tolerant mode of relation. It is as clear that the absolutizing of science into the only acceptable world-view, does not create a dialectic with the poetic as its oppositional alternative. The inversion of absolutized science is not the poetic – which remains solidly bound to the relativity of its faith and doubt – it is the fundamentalism whose religions have become dogmatic according to the same absolutizing presumption that has raised science on some kind of unassailable pedestal. And that presumption has no fixed basis in reality. Scientism, the fundamentalist scientific creed, and fundamentalism are on a dangerous

⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek (2009) *Violence*: 5.

⁵⁵ Susanne K. Langer (1962) *Philosophy in a New Key*: 128.

dance of fictive intensity, that can destroy the world far more irrevocably than can the nuclear weapons still stockpiled by moribund empires. Neither form an adequate basis for community. Between them, they condemn all community to destruction.

The poetic word, on the contrary, orients us to the world in a way that is profoundly meaningful. When we come across a poem that strikes us as meaningful, the moment we recognize its meaningfulness – though we may not know why – the work has in a sense already been tested, tested in the truth of its relation. That truth of relation – not a secondary relation that needs to be imposed upon it to establish its truth – is the potential origin, builder and medium for relation in a community. How might we test relational truth – as distinct from assertional truth – if not through such personal judgment? This suggests that judgment is a broader art than simply weighing up the pros and cons of an assertional argument. Judgment also encompasses the ability to realize and receive a *right relation*.

This is the moment at which we begin to comprehend the extent to which *the poetic community is itself grounded upon right relation*. That means, the poetic community has been *situated* in its right relation with the world. Yet because this is a consequence of the interplay of faith and doubt in the same figure, thereby delineating human finitude, such a right relation is always on the edge of error and its own contingency. The right relation will not be absolute by reason of its attendant faith and doubt, loyalty and distrust. Because the right relation has the character of *situation*, a way opens for us to consider the poetic word in its *mythic dimension*, for the mythic dimension of the poem is specifically the situational aspect that brings the person into right relation with a community and through the community, with the world. That implies how the mythic dimension, here, is not considered to be a body of stories already set in place from antiquity, but a *way of being in right relation* that changes along with the community and its poetry.

The mythic poem

When a community of persons is built on the poetic word, the community is brought into a right relation with the world in which it participates and with each other. This in turn reflects

back upon the poem, raising it to a new status of influence which we might designate by “myth” or by the “mythic dimension” of the poem. Only in its service as a builder of community can a poem be considered to have mythic status or be projected onto a mythic dimension. Although there appears to be no other term than “myth” to describe this status of poetry, I am still reluctant to consider this dimension of poetry “mythic” for the following reasons:

The word “myth” has a very chequered history with an extraordinary variety of conflicting meanings that cause endless confusion, bringing with it the very real possibility for generating contradiction. The *OED* defines “myth” as a traditional story “wholly or partly fictitious” that provides an explanation for a natural or social phenomenon or religious belief or rite. It also holds “myth” to be a widely held belief that is *false or totally discredited*. Myths have been collected and studied as a genre of folk literature by the Brothers Grimm, James Frazer, Robert Graves and, more recently, by Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade. As we have seen, Roland Barthes used the word “myth” to describe a secondary semiotic system that usurps and appropriates another semiotic system, emptying the first of all its ontological values. So using the term “myth” in a new context is perhaps foolhardy, fraught with danger and hidden traps, and probably adds to the confusion rather than reducing it. Strictly speaking, *mythos*, as Aristotle knew this term, is the *plot* of the classical tragedy, the storyline, and therefore it cannot be applied to poetry except epic and dramatic poetry. However, just as “myth” has come to mean many different things that confuse the issue, it has also gathered to itself connotations useful in determining the status of the poem that is both origin and builder of a community.

Northrop Frye identifies a sense of “myth” which holds to its *sacredness* in opposition to the vulgarism of myth as being *false or totally discredited*. This means a myth has been entrusted with a special gravity and significance. He says: “Sacred stories illustrate a specific social concern; profane stories are related to social concern much more distantly: sometimes, at least in their origin, not at all.”⁵⁶ It is from the definition of myth made by Northrop Frye that I employ

⁵⁶ Northrop Frye (1982) *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*: 33.

the conception of “myth” to further explain the poem’s role as the *word* for a community in its right relations. Drawing upon the work of Joseph Campbell will identify the *right relation* in a community as the mythic dimension of poetry.

Joseph Campbell, in the fourth volume of his magnum opus, *The Masks of God*, describes what he conceives as “creative mythology”; that which processes not from the communal to the personal, as is the case with “traditional mythology”, but from the personal to the communal:

In what I am calling “creative mythology, [...] the individual has had an experience of his own – of order, horror, beauty, or even exhilaration – which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realization has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of living myth – for those, that is to say, who receive and respond to it themselves, with recognition, uncoerced.⁵⁷

The mystery that we discerned in poetic metaphor serves to intensify the quality of the communication between poet with reader and, ultimately, between the members of the community that gathers to the poem. Clearly poetry can act as the *word* that brings people to the right relations of a community, thus fulfilling Campbell’s criteria for creative mythology.

A quick note needs to be inserted here on the particular terminology Campbell employs to denote the “communal” and the “personal”. The “communal” is clearly synonymous with the level of the social group and is indicative of the public sphere, and the “personal” is the level of the individual and is indicative of the private sphere. This is an identification that, as indicated in the discussion on the sociology of Ferdinand Tönnies above, I do not make. The community is a *personal entity* as much as the “personal” private sphere might be in its personal aspect. Indeed, the private sphere of the “personal” can be equally as impersonal as the collective. Campbell’s argument suffers from confusions caused by his adoption of sociological terminology.

The function of mythology, according to Campbell is essentially fourfold: 1/ to bring our awareness into relation with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of what Paul Tillich called

⁵⁷ Joseph Campbell (1976d) *The Masks of God Vol. 4 – Creative Mythology*: 4.

“Ultimate Concern”;⁵⁸ 2/ to provide a hermeneutic totality of this mystery, as known to present understanding; 3/ to encourage a moral order by orienting the person to his or her geographically and historically conditioned community,⁵⁹ and finally: 4/ nurturing the person, in relation with (4) himself (the microcosm), (3) the community (the mesocosm), (2) the universe (the macrocosm), and (1) the Ultimate Concern “beyond and within himself and all things.”⁶⁰ The descending order of the fourth function returns us through the previous three, therefore locating the person into all spheres of the human cosmos. These, in a very real sense, incorporate what I have deemed the *right relation*, thereby bringing the person into a proper relation with his or her world through the *word* of the mythic poem. Wherever myth is apparent, there still remains the degree to which that myth retains its communality.⁶¹ However, with *traditional mythology*, Campbell takes the view that it is generally *imposed* upon the individual through coercion, sometimes by force, sometimes with subtlety, yet by coercion nevertheless. *Creative mythology*, on the other hand, arises from the “insights, sentiments, thought, and vision of an adequate individual, loyal to his own experience of value.”⁶² This acts as a corrective to the empty carapace of past lives now enforced by authority. Campbell’s words, here, seem to echo Hegel’s strange and beautiful Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁶³ Campbell wrote:

Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores to existence the quality of adventure, at once shattering and reintegrating the fixed, already known, in the sacrificial creative fire of the becoming thing that is no thing at all but life, not as it *will be* or as it *should be*, as it *was* or as it *never will be*, but as it *is*, in depth, in process, *here and now*, inside and out.⁶⁴

Although creative mythology is not constituted exclusively of poetry, many of Campbell’s examples are indeed poems, sometimes drawn from the verse-dramas of

⁵⁸ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 14 ff.

⁵⁹ Joseph Campbell (1976d) *Creative Mythology*: 4-5.

⁶⁰ Joseph Campbell (1976d) *Creative Mythology*: 6.

⁶¹ *The New York Times Book Review*. “L141 American Best Sellers – Glossary of Literary Terms”: “Myth.”

⁶² Joseph Campbell (1976d) *Creative Mythology*: 7.

⁶³ Georg W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 15-6.

⁶⁴ Joseph Campbell (1976d) *Creative Mythology*: 7-8.

Shakespeare, sometimes from the poetry of T. S. Eliot, in particular *The Wasteland* which exerted an ongoing fascination for Campbell. We move, says Campbell, between two fundamental worlds that are entirely different. The “outward world” is the world of participation in our commonality, a world served by the scientist and history, the world of things, so to speak, “out there,” where people are interchangeable and language only communicates information and commands. On the other hand, says Campbell, creative artists are “mankind’s wakeners to recollection: summoners of our outward mind to conscious contact with ourselves [...] as spirit in the consciousness of being.”⁶⁵ The task of the creative artist is, accordingly, to communicate directly from one “inward world” to another to perpetrate a shock of experience, a real communication across the “void of space and time from one center (sic) of consciousness to another.”⁶⁶

In keeping with our earlier remarks on Campbell’s terminology, the terms “inner world” and “outer world” are also deemed problematic. The “inner world” flows from the personal “inner” to the public “outer” realms, as Campbell describes, but affects both “worlds,” a process I would prefer to identify as “personal,” that is to manifest our personhood in relation to the world, the social form of which is *community*. The “outer world” is, on the contrary, a flow from the “outer” to the “inner world,” rather like the coercive power of mythology derived from external (“outer”?) authority, that is the impersonal social form of the *collective*. By adopting “inner” and “outer” as his predominate modes of explanation, Joseph Campbell reflects his sincerely held Jungian model of the human psyche. However, he therefore incorporates assumptions which contradict his concept of creative mythology. The creative artist is the one, he says, who is “in contact with his own interior life, communicating through his art with those “out there.”⁶⁷ This presumes that the primary relation of artist is one of communicating this supposed “interior life” to an audience, a point that fails to identify how the artist faces the world in which

⁶⁵ Joseph Campbell (1976d) *Creative Mythology*: 92.

⁶⁶ Joseph Campbell (1976d) *Creative Mythology*: 93.

⁶⁷ Joseph Campbell (1976d) *Creative Mythology*: 93.

he or she lives. Otherwise, the “shock of recognition” would go unbidden in a welter of private speech completely unknown to anyone else. However, the flow from what Michael Polanyi calls “personal knowledge”, that we might claim derives from the creative vocation called forth in the poem, to another person from a state of *coveredness* to *disclosure*, might indeed be described by the convenient shorthand of “inner” to “outer worlds.” The problem we face then is that when a calling is in a state of *coveredness*, it is withheld from both poet and reader and, therefore, its *internality* to the poet is placed in question. It is the poet’s creative vocation, in relation with the other, *not “within” the poet at all*, that discloses the once-hidden mystery, rendering it available to both poet and reader. Terms such as “inner” and “outer” only confuse the issue by creating unnecessary problems of a *tertium quid* connecting “internal” to “external”.

However, having said what brings to the poem its mythic status, we haven’t really disclosed of what this mythic status entails. Every one of us comprehends that in myth there is something profound that touches upon us as persons. Mostly that hint of a message in the myth seems vague, ineffable – in a word, mysterious. We understand that it is profoundly significant, but its significance escapes us, withdrawing like all mystery. The very act of assuming a “point of view” is enough to pull a veil across it. As intimated, we return to a concept, first considered in the third theory chapter, to try and unpack what it is about myth and the poem in its mythic aspect, about which we are at least dimly aware of being central to our community.

Kerygma in poetic myth

It is justified here to return to Northrop Frye’s interpretation of *kerygma* because it obtains its power as that which is kerygmatic precisely within the communal situation as a product of the mythic. The communal basis of kerygma is implied, although not openly identified, by Frye’s contention that the kerygma becomes kerygmatic through its adoption over a great period of time by a community, thus imparting authority to its words. The criticisms I made concerning Frye’s historicism remain valid. Other texts coeval to *The Bible* no longer retain their kerygmatic value. Indeed, many texts *lose* kerygmatic value from the vicissitudes of time and history, and thus, acceptance of texts purely on the basis of their antiquity does not lead

us to conclude any degree of kerygmatic value imparted by longevity alone. However, should we transfer our attention from time to the acceptance of a community in which the work stands as origin and builder, we are on much more stable ground, for it is a community that confers on the poem its kerygmatic value.

Northrop Frye places kerygma into the context of myth, when he critiques Rudolph Bultmann's demythologising⁶⁸ of the *New Testament*. Frye believes Bultmann to be profoundly mistaken in opposing kerygma to myth. Abolish myth, says Frye, and the kerygma, that Bultmann hoped to release from its matrix of myth, is also abolished.⁶⁹ Bultmann clearly defined "myth" as being synonymous with both *archaic metaphysics* – such as pre-Copernican conceptions of the relation of the Earth to the cosmos – and that which is scientifically *false*. Interestingly, in a claim that certainly did not escape Frye, the aspects of the Gospels Bultmann identified as their kerygma – namely the Teaching, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ⁷⁰ – are themselves powerfully mythic. It is myth which acts as the true vehicle for kerygma and it is the community brought into being by the poem which takes the poem and places it firmly into the mythic. Hence community, which gives birth to myth, also brings the kerygma, which is the *proclamation* associated with myth, into our active communal life.

Reinterpreting the way kerygma operates will remove it from the continuum of rhetoric, into which Frye placed it, and declare it as that which builds community. Frye said it himself: the kerygma is expressed through myth and "the real interest of myth is to draw a circumference around a human community and look inward toward that community, not to inquire into the operations of nature,"⁷¹ an observation that contradicts a central tenet in the study of mythology up to our time. J. G. Frazer understood mythology as the pre-scientific mind attempting to explain the ways of nature, rather similar to Bultmann in fact.⁷²

⁶⁸ Rudolf Bultmann (1953) "New testament and mythology" in Hans Werner Bartsch ed. (1953) *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*: 1-16.

⁶⁹ Northrop Frye (1982) *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*: 29-30.

⁷⁰ Rudolf Bultmann (1953) "New testament and mythology": 15.

⁷¹ Northrop Frye (1982) *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*: 37.

⁷² J. G. Frazer (1957) *The Golden Bough*: 711.

It may not matter when or where a poetic work arises that determines its kerygmatic value, although it is possible that a work contemporary with its community will employ contemporary language and thus possibly be meaningful in a kerygmatic way as a consequence. However, that being said, it does appear that a certain temporal distance might aid in both creating a strong appreciation of the work as an origin and to have enough time to build community. What is significant is neither its historical age nor its geographical origin but rather its value as the *word* – I employ a traditional theological expression to account for all special words – that is spoken between people in the community. From this standpoint, kerygma will be identified as that which articulates the *between* which is in its essence *interpersonal*. The person is confirmed in his or her community, and the interpersonal is the realm in which a community performs this task.

“Kerygma” is ancient Greek for “proclamation” – a technical term in theology – and we can identify this as associated with the axial *affirmation* of a poetic metaphor. But kerygma takes us further than affirmation as I have outlined it there. Kerygma takes us from the arena of the single person – poet or reader – to the notion of the proclamation that is made in and to a community. Indeed, it is this proclamation that first proclaims the community in itself to itself as a community. In many respects, kerygma is the projection of poetic affirmation onto the communal plane, in relation to myth and the mythic dimension which in turn is related to poetic metaphor also projected onto the communal plane. Therefore, just as poetic metaphor becomes the means by which an affirmation is made possible, so myth and the mythic becomes the means by which kerygma is made possible. As we have already seen, in his commentary upon Rudolf Bultmann, Northrop Frye makes exactly this point. Now Frye tends to limit his discussion of kerygma to *sacred texts*, with the occasional side glance at so-called “secular” kerygmatic texts such as *The Communist Manifesto*.⁷³ But I am generalizing the idea to any poetic work that

⁷³ Northrop Frye (1990) *Words with Power*: 117.

assumes the office of origin and builder for a community properly so-called by which the work's metaphor has been transposed to mythic status.

Frye argues how kerygmatic writing normally demands a literary – i.e., a mythical and metaphorical – basis, and how the kerygmatic will not emerge from a direct personal address, unlike ordinary rhetoric.⁷⁴ Owing to the concrete presence of the poem, the person of the poet is veiled. Yet what is more personal than a poem? The primary address of the poet is not towards the reader *per se*. Does that mean the poem is not a direct personal address? It is not direct in the narrow sense of projecting its author's point of view onto the group, as if the poet's primary purpose is to convince like rhetoric and other didactic modes of writing, including critical discourse. Because the poet is veiled in the concrete presence of the poem, a simple and direct personal address is by its very nature withheld. Therefore, a poet's focus is not rhetorical, as Frye observes. He identifies poetry as lying on the border zone between rhetoric on one side and kerygma on the other, somehow partaking of both in some senses. And it is true that not every poem becomes communal and, therefore, kerygmatic. And there is didactic poetry which, like rhetoric, does aim to convince. However, poetry *qua* poetry is not subordinate to convincement or conviction. Didactic poetry is primarily rhetoric in the form of poetry and, therefore, remains motivated by the ebb and flow of convincement and conviction.⁷⁵ Yet, although the veiled poet does not directly address the reader, the poem itself *does* address the reader.

My earlier disquiet concerning Frye's conception of kerygma owed to the *claim* kerygmatic speech, he supposed, placed upon its reader. The general feeling of compulsion

⁷⁴ Northrop Frye (1990) *Words with Power*: 116

⁷⁵ Hegel, too, had problems with the inclusion of didactic poetry amongst the poetic arts: "Didactic poetry is not to be numbered amongst the proper forms of art. For in it we find, on the one hand, the content already cut and dried and developed explicitly as meaning in its therefore prosaic form, and, on the other hand, the artistic shape which yet can only be tacked on to the content in an entirely external way because the content has already been completely characterized prosaically for apprehension; and in its prosaic aspect, i.e. its universal abstract significance, and in no other aspect, the content is to be expressed for intellectual examination and reflection with the aim of instruction. Therefore, given this external relation [between form and content], art can, in the didactic poem, concern itself with nothing but externals such as metre, for example, elevated diction, interspersed episodes, images, similes, subjoined explosions' of feeling, faster development, quicker transitions, etc. These do not penetrate the content as such; they stand beside it as an appendage in order by their relative vivacity to enliven the seriousness and dryness of the doctrine and to make life more agreeable." (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts. Vol. 2*: 423)

identified in such a claim stands in stark contrast to the divergent hermeneutic attributed to poetry and confuses kerygma to a certain extent with rhetoric. We saw how Frye discounted the idea of a direct address between poet and reader in kerygma. However, there is still an *address* and it is this which replaces the *claim* as the active dimension in *appealing* to the reader. When the poem becomes the *word* that is spoken from person to person, it enters into and constitutes the address of speaker to listener. This address is not the simple one from poet to reader – Frye is quite correct here – but instead the poem has been taken up as the *word* offering a relation between a speaker and listener. Even should the listener refuse the address, the address is still made and in that address – the words spoken may not be the same words of the poem yet the poem lies behind and in the address undertaken – the kerygmatic value of the poem is rendered from potential to actual. This means that a symbiosis between poem and community establishes the poem as kerygma. Kerygma does not lie purely within sacred texts as a special property but in the response of the religious community in becoming established upon them, in turn determining the texts in their kerygmatic value as “sacred”. That entails the projection of poetry onto the communal plane establishing its sanctification precisely because it is able to manifest the Between and provide a “myth to live by” – the expression is from Joseph Campbell’s book of the same name – for the community. The sort of “myth to live by,” in this sense, entails the speaking of the *word* by a community.

If we return to the description of “kerygma” as a *proclamation*, we can determine the nature of a proclamation as a *calling* to a community and, equally, a *calling forth* of a community. It is the response to the call as a community that establishes the community as more than an aggregate of people. The community is called forth to call forth that which calls to be called forth. The community is itself proclaimed. The dialogue between proclamation and the people returns us to the calling which is all *one call*. Northrop Frye already recognized something like this when he wrote:

At this point the term prophetic falls into place as indicating both a meta-literary direction latent within literature and the human medium transmitting the

kerygmatic to the idiom of ordinary language. What makes a prophet a genuine prophet, we may feel, is not what he says but what is said to him. But as soon as we use this not-but construction, we are going off the rails. We have to try to get past the verbal barrier implied: if the word inspiration means anything at all, it means the point at which the cleavage between active speech and reception of speech merges into unity. At this point we are in a genuinely kerygmatic realm.⁷⁶

The call, which constitutes the relation with the poem as proclamation, emerges in the history of the community as a creation myth. Kerygma, therefore, manifests creative vocation on a communal plane. This lies at the heart of the community's "myth to live by" in the sense that it calls the community into being and maintains that community as a genuine community properly so-called. Whereas the poet's creative vocation integrates his or her calling of the poem into existence on a single person basis, the poem as the bearer of a vocational moment, which established the poet as a poet and person, now potentially stands forth as a communal vocation. It is able through its metaphors to be spoken by one person to another, thereby initiating the poem as proclamation. The proclamation of kerygma calls upon each person not only to enter into a right relation with the world but to enter into a right relation with each other. And this intrinsic relation within all creative vocation – including scientific creativity *before* it is depersonalized by the conventions of scientific writing – highlights the interpersonal values that belong within all authentic relationship that is profoundly ontological. Kerygma is *interpersonal* and *ontological*. The being of the community and of its members has been formed and underlined by the poem as it is taken up into interpersonal communication. Therefore, the interpersonal is an extension of personal values into community. Kerygma is *personal* to this extent.

Normally the word "personal" is applied to individuals but here we find it also applies to a community. What we understand by the "personal" cannot be restricted to the single person because it also applies to a group of many persons when they are in a community. It is a term that does not denote quantity – as is the confusion generated by the "personal"/"society" duality – but the *quality* of the relations ensuing. And, perhaps more pertinent to our theme, "personal"

⁷⁶ Northrop Frye (1990) *Words with Power*: 118.

is also applied to that reflected sensibility whereby a meaningful response is occasioned by the person's address, such that the community itself is recognized as meaningful. That address of person to person incorporates the poem, such that the poem reveals its mythic dimension of the kerygmatic.

Within the poem cycle "Ward Two," Francis Webb conceives of a community of being that, necessarily, must be composed of otherness: the other marginalised from social norms by discourses of deviation. In opening a relation with these others, the poem serves as a clear description of the nature of a community and what constitutes a community of being. But it also tells us that those who stand unrepentant within their alienation are not only precluded from community but also prevent others from reaching out to eternal being through them. Spirit itself is a communication, a gift, granted by one person to another in an act of grace. Alienation, on the other hand, is shown not only to have ethical and philosophical implications but also religious significance as well.

Case Study Chapter VI

Ward Two

Whereas Francis Webb's explorer poems dealt with historical subjects, *Ward Two* presents us with a community immediately present to the poet. Like *Around Costessey*, *Ward Two* uses poetry like an auger to pierce the successive layers of the palimpsest of spirit. The satirical bent of Webb reaches a novel synthesis with his characterization, underscoring the humanity in the community of the Ward. This includes the humanity manifest in the awful instruments of suffering and medical subjugation, such as the truly dreadful pneumo-encephalograph, a machine that causes the patient agony when introducing a bubble of air into the spine to render brain tumours visible to x-rays. Similar to the torturer Topcliffe and his victim Gerard in *Around Costessey*, Webb does not let the distinction between "good" and "evil" cloud the machine's humanity or its spiritual dimension. Nor does Webb detract from the humanity of these most vulnerable, marginalised and pitiable of all his characters, even when they cannot escape their alienation.

Bill Ashcroft identifies *conflict* as occupying a central stage in the cycle's path leading towards spiritual redemption, a journey through conflict to harmony and peace.¹ Conflict can be seen right from the start in the metaphors employed in "The pneumo-encephalograph" to affirm a passage from agony and the scientist's impersonal art to recovery and harmony with existence. But although this marks the path the poetry must take, identifying the spirit in which we ourselves are brought to salvation, nevertheless, the path shows itself most powerfully in the poet's concrete relations with the Ward's inmates, for in those relations we seek and discover the community of what Martin Buber called the *eternal Thou*:

Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*; by means of every particular *Thou* the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou*. Through this mediation of the *Thou* of all beings fulfilment, and non-fulfilment, of relations comes to them: the inborn *Thou* is

¹ William (Bill) D. Ashcroft (1979) "'realer than Real': Francis Webb's *Ward Two*": 60-61

realized in each relation and consummated in none. It is consummated only in the direct relation with the *Thou* that by its nature cannot become *It*.²

Our redemption from the conflicts intrinsic to existence is to be found, not in fleeing conflict, but in the dialectical reality of conflict's desolation. The way draws us into becoming through a purgatory of suffering. This concrete becoming points into the heart of the unchanging, timeless being of the *eternal Thou*. However, when the person hides himself behind self-imposed defences, no address to another is possible, then the path to the *eternal Thou* continues to be blocked. This in itself reveals both the ethical importance of relation and its religious or spiritual significance. It is in the situation of these true encounters, in the "receptive hour",³ that the poet's acknowledgement of the path to healing and wholeness assumes its most profound metaphors of faith, both from the point of view of the poet's creative vocation and from the highly symbolic encounter identifying writing with our present fallen state. This fallen state has something like the cast of Heidegger's conception of "thrownness." The poet confronts the tragedy of the Old Timer, until that extraordinary moment when the Old Timer truly addresses him for the first time.⁴ Addressing another person need not entail the transfer of new information. Contrasting with the Old Timer, the poet also confronts the tragedy of an anonymous "man" about whom we learn nothing but that he dwells solely in his memories, unable to reach out to anyone at all.⁵ He does not even possess the dignity of a name or title like "Old Timer." Closed off by the wall that surrounds the soul, for which the Wall that isolates the Ward stands as a metaphor, the "man" is as much a consequence of our humanity as is the aspiration towards the *eternal Thou*. Webb treats the alienated with the same sympathy he brings to those who truly belong to the community. The contrasts and paradoxes he identifies in the people who dwell within the Ward serve to make this poem-cycle one of his most powerful and personal.

² Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 75.

³ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 11.

⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 318.

⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 321-2.

Portraits of redemption

In expectation of dreadful pain, the sleepless patient, fighting off the bedclothes that have wound into a “tight scrimmage,” sits writing at his desk. This expectation is not just about physical suffering but a situation charged with spiritual struggle. By the adoption of simple rhyming couplets, Webb casts this episode into heroic terms, thereby stepping beyond the apparent mundane realities of the hospital ward. Webb alludes to Paul, from First Corinthians: “[F]or now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known,”⁶ identifying both the opacity of what is to be confronted and of the spiritual knowledge to be garnered finally in a face-to-face encounter with suffering. In the waiting, nothing the patient might do can hasten the hour nor postpone it. Time, in the image of the hourglass, must run its course, leaving the patient impotent and anxious as “passion and piece [are] trussed together.” Yet although there is spiritual significance in these events, the face of God is barely glimpsed during this impotent anticipation of suffering as the immediate future is held in fear and trembling:

May every bone and vessel confess power
To loathe suffering in you
As in myself, that arcane simmering brew.⁷

With false bravura, the patient enters the “cabin of art” where the operation is to be performed. The normal differentiation of science and art, as in C. P. Snow’s “two cultures”, has been instantly overcome here by the recognition that in this bastion of medical science, the act is as much a consequence of a specialist’s art as it is of scientific technology.⁸ Neither is the humanity and spiritual significance of this painful art absent from the predominance of machinery. Webb’s metaphysics of spirit introduces metaphors of conflict – contraband, guerrilla, hunting, foxhole, cosmic war, fire clashes with fire – creating a vision of the war being waged over the soul of the patient with almost Zoroastrian intensity. Light and darkness clash, as

⁶ 1 *Corinthians* 13:12

⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 315.

⁸ Jacob Bronowski (1973) *The Ascent of Man*: 330.

a necessary battle in the spiritual crisis that staggers on towards healing. The introduced bubble of air works its agonising way up the spinal cord to flush out the “ancient sore” of the tumour:

The spore of oxygen passes
Skidding over old inclines and crevasses,
Hunting an ancient sore,
Foxhole of impulse in a minute cosmic war.⁹

But the “ancient sore” is also the fallen state of Original Sin, a transgression of the distant past that permeates the present, tainting our future – “flints coupling for the spark ‘ – that finds its modern version in the Oedipus Complex of Freudian theory: “Concordant of nature and desire /Was revoked in you...” Suffering, as penance, removes the ancient stain.

Another is called upon to bear witness to this agony. The witness as well as the one who suffers – and they might indeed be the same person – is granted access to this dread mystery.

Let me ask while you are still,
What in you marshalled this improbable will:
Instruments supple as the flute,
Vigilant eyes, mouths that are almost mute,
X-rays scintillant as a flower,
Tossed in a corner the plumes of falsehood, power?¹⁰

What response could be given to this question but: “Only your suffering.” Yet the language speaks of another act of suffering, that of the Atonement. The *Thou*, whose mystery unfolds before us in agonising pain, like the dreadful machine of execution and humiliation, the Cross of the crucifixion, opens a path to the *eternal Thou* as suffering transforms through alchemical transmutation into the pure gold of the sacrament. The bubble of air, a mere bubble of air, turns the grimace of pain into a song of the Holy Spirit, entirely refined from the blunt edge of mechanistic humiliation into a rarefied instrument for obtaining the sacrament of healing:

Of pain’s amalgam with gold let some man sing
While, pale and fluent and rare

⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 315.

¹⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 315.

As the Holy Spirit, travels the bubble of air.¹¹

Bill Ashcroft discovered in this an allusion to the Hermetic Alchemists.¹² Their aim was to distil the noble essence, the ‘materia prima’ of matter, by refining gold from common metals like lead. Suffering has a prime place in accomplishing this process. Transcending the scientific distinction of objectivity, that differentiates subject from object,¹³ the alchemists identified with the refining processes such that the fire refining gold from gross material is the same fire that refines the soul from gross existence. This idea continues to bear fruit as it did in the writings of Carl Jung.¹⁴ Titus Burckhardt wrote on this alchemy of suffering:

In alchemy, the soul is considered as being substantially identical with the materia prima of the formal world [...] ‘Matter’ first of all presents itself to the ‘artist’ under a brute aspect or chaotic state, which does not mean a state of disorder, but a state ‘before order’ [...] It is in himself that the alchemist discovers the ‘chaos’, after having reduced his soul to its immediate substratum, in clearing away from it all that is relatively ‘exterior’ [...] it is precisely when this chaos has been worked, purified and reduced to its pristine ‘virginal’ condition that the spiritual *Fiat Lux* takes place, the marriage of soul and spirit.¹⁵

Coupling this reference of alchemical purification with the Biblical reference to the “refiner’s fire” of *Malachi* 3:2 – “fire clashes with fire” – Ashcroft calls our attention to the scope of Webb’s spiritual vision. He also notes Webb’s accommodation of Augustine’s exclamation: “[And] my thoughts [...] are rent and mangled with tumultuous varieties, until I flow together into Thee, purified and molten by the fire of Thy love.”¹⁶

‘The pneumo-encephalograph’ serves as an introduction to the spirituality of ‘Harry’, in whom the purest gold is distilled from the dross of the human soul. The existential dialectic that begins in the crucible of mechanistic suffering, reaches its first apotheosis in the figure of the

¹¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 315.

¹² W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) “‘realer than Real’: 62.

¹³ Morris Berman (1984) *The Re-enchantment of the World*:

¹⁴ Of Carl Jung’s *Collected Works*, 3 volumes are devoted to alchemy: (1968a) *Psychology and Alchemy*, (1968b) *Alchemical Studies* & (1970) *Mysterium Coniunctionis*

¹⁵ Q. in W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) “‘realer than Real’: 62.

¹⁶ Augustine (1957) *Confessions*: Ch. XI, para. 29: 275.

“mongoloid” man attempting to write a simple letter. There is conflict here too, but it is a conflict derived from the confrontation between a pure spirit, silent and serene, with the exigencies of a fallen state symbolized by the need to articulate in written language that which is ineffable. Poetry represents both the fallen state struggling to encounter the purity of a beatific soul, and a sacrament that points towards the mystery of holiness itself.

Harry sits at the “holy holy chair and table”¹⁷ to write his letter. The sense of this being an altar is underlined by “our droll old men” – one can hear the sarcastic snigger in these words – who constantly dart “where he weaves his sacrament.” The struggle for this mongoloid man is to render into words his essentially inarticulate and ineffable existence. But there is also a spiritual significance in this “pudgy Christ,” for the articulation of his ineffability mirrors the struggle of Christ to incarnate divinity on this earth. Harry is the holy innocent – the sacrificial lamb – living without guile or deceit.

The struggle for Harry begins with his need to obtain paper, pen and ink, ordinary things denied to the patients. Harry has begged for these inadequate instruments of his failure. The uncommon word ‘blent’ echoes its use in the first poem, in which it describes the healing of the soul:

Sacrifice? Propitiation? All are blent,
In the moron’s painstaking fingers – so painstaking.¹⁸

The common uniform of the Ward becomes transfigured on Harry – they are the vestments of the priest: “His vestments our giddy yarns of the firmament.”¹⁹ Mary’s cloak is traditionally sky-blue, the colour of the firmament. Such metaphors point to the sacrament when ordinary things – bread and wine – and ordinary human beings transubstantiate into a medium for communicating holiness:

– but not yet
Has our giddy alphabet

¹⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 316.

¹⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 316.

¹⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 316.

Perplexed his priestcraft and spilled the cruet of innocence.²⁰

But in a real sense, Harry is the Word, as he is filled with “the Word unwritten,” the divine logos of John’s almost Gnostic gospel.²¹ Except this is the sacrament “unawares”, similar to the Ancient Mariner blessing the water-snakes the moment the spell breaks and Coleridge’s antihero begins his striving towards redemption and forgiveness. Whereas ordinary people on the street outside and the Ward’s other patients “plucked from the world of commonsense,” are all given over to the aesthete’s life of pride, desire and avarice “fondling between our hands some shining loot, /Wife, mother, beach, fisticuffs, eloquence,” – Harry is made from stranger material shaped and transubstantiated by intentions wholly different from the ordinary acquisitive wants that dominate our waking hours:

What queer shards we could steal
Shaped him realer than the Real:
But it is no goddess of ours guiding the fingers and the thumb.²²

Is there an echo of William Blake’s Tiger in these lines? “What immortal hand or eye /Could shape thy fearful symmetry?” The allusion underlines the divinity behind this ill-shapen human being. His very difference sets him apart. Yet in him, undisguised by the accretions of falsehood that we daily clothe ourselves, exists the undiminished light of divinity:

Because the wise world has forever and ever rejected
Him and because your children would scream at the sight
Of his mongol mouth stained with food, he has resurrected
The spontaneous thought retarded and infantile Light.²³

The dynamics of true faith are here revealed at their starkest. Extreme doubt, brought on by the “is-not” that motivates us to ever-deeper pointing-towards, confronts us in the ludicrous figure of Harry, his awful presence made plain in some of Webb’s most bleak writing:

The image besieges our Troy. Consider the sick
Convulsions of movement, and the featureless baldy sun

²⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 316.

²¹ Elaine Pagels (1982) *The Gnostic Gospels*: 129.

²² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 316.

²³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 317.

Insensible – sparing that compulsive nervous tic.²⁴

It is this confrontation with the existential “is-not” of the speaking doubt that makes its attendant, and indeed contrary movement, faith, the existential “is” of our affirmation, all the more profound, all the stronger for its encasement in a dialectic with negativity. The dialectic reflects Tertullian’s most famous and misquoted of lines, “It is certain because it is impossible” (“Certum est, quia impossibile”):

Whatever is beneath God's dignity is for my advantage.
I am saved if I am not ashamed of my Lord. Whosoever is
ashamed of me, he says, of him will I also be ashamed. I find no other
grounds for shame, such as may prove that in contempt of
dishonour I am nobly shameless and advantageously a fool. The Son
of God was crucified: I am not ashamed – because it is shameful.
The Son of God died: it is immediately credible – because it is
silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain – because it is
impossible. But how can these acts be true in him, if he himself
was not true, if he had not truly in himself that which could be
crucified, which could die, which could be buried and raised up
again--this flesh, in fact, suffused with blood, scaffolded of bones,
threaded through with sinews, intertwined with veins, competent
to be born and to die, human unquestionably, as born of a human
mother?²⁵

The religious faith of Francis Webb is notably informed by the dialectic of poetic faith, an understanding that returns us to the existential worthiness of, for example, the redeemed Leper in *The Canticle*. In this misshapen monster, Harry the mongoloid points towards the perfection of the resurrected Christ as trenchantly as any of Webb’s antiheroes, the defects of his earthly existence transubstantiating into an incarnation of divinity:

Transfigured with him we stand
Amongst walls of the no-man’s-land
While he licks the soiled envelope with lover’s caress

²⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 316-7.

²⁵ Tertullian (2002) *Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation (De Carne Christi)*: Ch 5, 4.

Directing it to the House of no known address.²⁶

Directing us to the Heaven of Our Father's mansion – the “House of no known address” – Francis Webb brings us into the magic circle of Martin Buber's “the parallel lines of relation point towards the *eternal Thou*.”²⁷ Those elements of the poem described as *unknown* identify the secret spiritual essence towards which the poet's faith is directed. The woman to whom he writes is unknown. Yet she is the Virgin Mary. She is no “goddess of ours” but is introduced by the words that Wisdom cries at the gates of the city in *Proverbs* 8:23: “She cries: *Ab aeterno ordinata sum*.”²⁸ The words are roughly translated from the Latin: “I am ordained from eternity.” During the Middle Ages, Wisdom was identified with Mary, the unknown woman, the old shape weeping at the foot of the Cross. Yet so timorous is the selfhood of Harry that, without guile or desire, he becomes one with Mary. This misshapen travesty of humanity is the symbol of Mary's compassion in the Ward. Faith and doubt belong to the same poetic figure. Faith and doubt belong to the same dialectic of religious experience.

Harry thus stands for the ultimate goal of life, to attain unity with the transcendent. His incarnation of the divine presence is grounded for us in terrible doubt that such a travesty of our humanity should suit him to this purpose. In the stages outlined by Kierkegaard, Harry has from birth obtained to the religious, bypassing the aesthetic and the ethical. Indeed, judged by these two stages, Harry fails miserably. For the aesthetic stage, he lives in profound degradation. He is barely human on aesthetic grounds. While for the ethical stage, which involves the choosing of oneself and the choosing of one's despair – which are really the same thing for Kierkegaard – Harry has neither a self nor despair and quite incapable of choosing them if he had. Within the commonplace images of divinity, which turn upon aesthetic beauty and the freedom to choose faith, there will be no room for Harry. The Ward is filled with damaged people who fail the normal tests for social worth, especially Harry. Yet their struggles are our struggles: the struggle for wholeness, the struggle for faith, the struggle for healing, the struggle for redemption. How

²⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 317.

²⁷ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 75.

²⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 316.

hard does Harry struggle simply to write a letter with words that arise beyond his ability to form them? His struggle is the most pitiable of all. And yet, he transubstantiates into something beyond articulation, something towards which words can only point. The greater the doubt: the deeper the affirmation of faith.

A community of faith

In the first two poems of *Ward Two*, we have been asked to recognize the divine face in an instrument of medical suffering and in a damaged man, damaged even beyond formal recognition as a human being. Against this contrasting pair of opposites – the travesty of doubt against its dialectical subordination by spiritual faith – all other characters in the Ward will be measured. The ultimate destiny of faith defines each character in the sequence, as he struggles upon the same path, according to the existential stage he has reached. Harry inhabits the divine mystery precisely because he dwells within the origin, undifferentiated from the mystery and without the necessity to struggle towards it, even though he struggles against insuperable odds to write his letter and bring words into his magic circle. Harry's struggle is precisely the struggle of the poet to put the ineffable mystery of the divine into words, to communicate it to his fellows in the Ward, to communicate them to us and thus provide the mythological focus for a community of faith.

The routine of the Ward – “Sit, feed, sleep, have done” – imposed by overbearing but anonymous warders – “gauleiters with burnished window badges, no faces”²⁹ – confines and alienates the Ward's community. Webb links alienation from others to alienation from the self and spirit. This is certainly the existential condition of the Old Timer. His initial alienation turns in upon itself. He is a prisoner within the prison behind the façade of his withering self, turning his negation upon all around him.

O Being is tender and succulent and porous:
Erect your four paternal walls of stone.³⁰

²⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 317.

³⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 317.

Like the institution that has removed them from the broader society, the Old Timer raises his “walls of stone” against others – “Isolate the Identity, clasp its dwindling head.” But they are walls that in turn reflect the same sense of paternalism protecting the ego from the Enemy. They shut out the sunlight and only allow “deferential stars [to] peep in one by one.” He does not address anyone else but merely repeats the mantras of his monologue, a redoubt against engagement, against dialogue. Although he speaks of past relationships – “Children who loved him, Bathurst, Orange, of green /Neighbourliness, of the silken and stony vision: /His faith-healing, his compassion”³¹ – they are erected against the listener. Towards him, the other patients grow increasingly non-committal as he leans “against his block of wall.” True engagement requires an address of being to being. But the Old Timer is locked inside his monologue. The words are there but the address is not. They do not build communication but a barrier.

However, one day in desperation, he ambushes the poet, his pipe clenched between his teeth “as an exotic snake poised itself for the falling /Of heart’s blood,” the address of dialogue is made and the barriers melt between them. To both men it is unexpected.

[A]n ancient iron of unrest
Melted before his hopeful word of address.
Christ, how I melted! For healing and faith were ripe
As Bathurst opening the gigantic West
Or Orange golden as the breast.³²

The spirit of community arises from the encounter for both the one who addresses and the one who is addressed. Faith must answer the doubt that distances but if walls are raised to prevent relation then faith is excluded. This was the Old Timer’s predicament before making the real address to the poet. Webb’s use of the snake simile reflects the serpent in the Garden, boding ill like the “virus /Eating its way, lipping, complaining /In a multitude of cozening wheedling voices”. Although the words are the same as before – Bathurst, Orange – yet now these words open new possibility. What has changed lies not in the words spoken by Old Timer but in his

³¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 318.

³² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 318.

actual address. He speaks to the person not according to the monological script but in dialogue, although the script is the same. The same but how different. And for a moment, both men forget their despair. Even in this old man, the poet recognizes the way to the *eternal Thou* in him, through him, by him. This man, whose words have been raised as a bastion against the world and his fellow patients, contrasts so markedly with Harry who barely dwells in language at all. Behind these walls the protected self withers, unable to receive sustenance from encountering others.³³

Isolate the Identity, clasp its dwindling head.
Your birth was again the birth of the All,
The Enemy: he treads roads, lumbers through pastures,
Musters the squeaking horde of the countless dead.³⁴

Dialogical address proves to be the ground of being: “O Being is tender and succulent and porous.” By fulfilling identity in dialogue, the way is open for relation with the mystery of the Other and thus a path to the Mystery of mysteries within all life. Alienation from others results in alienation from the spiritual centre of community. Protection does not enlarge; it diminishes what it protects until there is nothing lingering behind that suffocating façade.

The poet’s own avoidance of the Old Timer, even in the Ward where they are crowded together, reflects the game of the protective Wall the old man erects around himself. Alienation engenders avoidance in others with ethical and religious consequences that the poet might understate but which lie central to the poem, nevertheless. The protective Wall refuses the grace of divinity to others. We can refuse to others the path to the *eternal Thou* through our own intransigence. When the Old Timer finally addresses the poet as a person, the possibility is at last made available for the poet to reach the divine through him. Desolation is brought to others simply by the expedience of erecting such impersonal barriers. Yet how incredible it is that such barriers are so easily breached and divine possibility made available in a simple act of grace – by really addressing the other person, not with fine words designed to impress nor even with words

³³ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) “‘realer than Real’”: 65.

³⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 317.

alluding to the fact of the address, but addressing the other person directly with one's own being when "healing and faith were ripe." The alienation and isolation of oneself in desolation can thus also be understood as an act of harm to others with profound ethical consequences as well as spiritual consequences. To answer desolation, says Ignatius Loyola, is to find consolation.³⁵ That is a message that goes at least as far back as Boethius.

It is in the meeting with the other in a community, whether another in the microcosm of the Ward or in the macrocosm of the world beyond these four walls, that the path to the *eternal Thou* lies. The limits imposed or "lame accepted,"³⁶ hindering our access to self-realization, are revealed for the absurdity they really are. A kookaburra passes judgment on the Walls erected against the world, both symbolic and actual.

The sense of confinement, almost of claustrophobia, hinges on impotence in dealing with strong emotions: "We fingered the World, or watered little cacti of anger." The space within sits introverted upon itself, engendering no effective response to the emotions and paranoia of the patients: "But at dawn that shiver in the limbs of a eunuch pity."

Into this portrait of despair, wrought in metaphors derived from science, bursts a "lumbering giant ghost of laughter" in a kookaburra, his exploding into the patient's narrow cosmos:

His guffaw like some coup of megatons past belief
Shivers our gold and copper grief:
History's bowels roll for breakfast as history wakes.³⁷

Employing such metaphors, Webb reveals just how profoundly shocking is this explosion of derisive laughter. All illusions of self-sufficiency are shattered by the Kookaburra's judgment. Bill Ashcroft believes the "Fixed Idea" pertains to Hegel's Idea of absolute Being which might be approached through the contours of the Ward.³⁸ But the "Fixed Idea" also refers to an *Idea*

³⁵ Louis J. Puhl (1951) *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*: Para. 316-324: 142-144.

³⁶ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) "realer than Real": 66.

³⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 319.

³⁸ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) "realer than Real": 66.

Fixe, dominating thought in a prison of neurosis and paranoia. A gesture, a patient's Sign of the Cross, is raised to fend off the world:

Our menial hands and trouserlegs sweep in the brief
Gesture, the Fixed Idea; or time's complaint
Flutters in this air-pocket like a leaf.³⁹

But the world will not be fended off. The judgment of the laughter fills every crack and crevice of the morning's routine, shown for its shortcomings of doubt, yet in a paradoxical move, also shown for its cosmic dimensions of faith within which we all partake. The paradox is also the paradox of the Wall in relation to the world which surrounds it, for the Wall belongs to the world, yet sets itself at a distance from it. It shuns the world, yet invites relation with it. It protects the Ward, yet compromises what it protects. It was erected to heal, yet it signals the disease that ravages the minds of its inmates. The kookaburra introduces a note of chaos to the fixed order – the “Fixed Idea” – behind the Wall. Yet the bird is not chaotic. It passes judgment upon the inmates, yet it is not judgmental. The kookaburra is at once a figure of the natural world and of the supernatural world, a bird laughing derisively at human folly and an angel proclaiming the kingdom of God:

Today on the sky's porous hulk there is unfurled
Naïve bunting: very discretely, arms and legs
Of light tread the greying timbers.⁴⁰

Webb's dialectic sets this bird apart from earthly birds without negating its earthly origin. In a concrete sign, the bird points towards the absurdity of human finitude. A bird can soar through the heavens but the human being is tied to the ground. For the bird, the Wall proves no hindrance. Aside from providing a convenient place to roost for the night, the Wall has no meaning for the kookaburra but the Wall proves a major obstruction for us. More importantly, the World beyond the physical Wall stands for the spiritual realm beyond the metaphorical Wall we erect around ourselves. The kookaburra is right to mock.

³⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 319.

⁴⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 319.

Just as the kookaburra points to both earthly life and the spirit beyond, so too does the homosexual, a victim who bears in his being the Origin of the divine spark. Within the shadow of immense doubt in a place where being itself is placed into jeopardy, the source of faith shines bright in him whose ambivalence raises terror in the poet. “To watch,” he tells us, “may be deadly.” Indeed, within the Ward the being of each inmate is placed into jeopardy and this is one source for their terror:

There is no judgment, compulsion,
And the object becomes ourselves. That is the terror:
We have simply ceased, are not dead, and have been
And are; only movement – our movement – is relegated,
Only thought, being – our thought, being – are given
Over; and pray God it be simply given.⁴¹

The great organ stops rive the heart in the confrontation with this most terrifying desolation of them all: the descent into absence by constructing a self from the detritus of non-being. The movement of non-being is found in “disgust and indifference” and in the “thin hurried magnanimity” towards the homosexual. His sexuality and being seemed to be sufficiently compromised to be characterized as a *radical other*, someone barely tolerated in either society or in the community of Ward Two. Yet through him, Webb realizes, is also the gateway towards spiritual awakening. Whereas Harry was the Word in the paradox of the inarticulate mongoloid man, the homosexual emerges as the Beginning:⁴²

I shall only watch. He is born, seized by joy,
I shall not speak of that joy, seeing it only
As the lighted house, the security, the Beginning.⁴³

The “Beginning” refers us to the opening line of the *Gospel of John*: “In the beginning was the Word...” and thus in simple retelling, we are returned to the Word made flesh in the figure of Harry. The Homosexual’s nature as the Beginning also reflects a similar lack of self-

⁴¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 319-20.

⁴² W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) ““realer than Real””: 66.

⁴³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 320.

consciousness to Harry, divinity playing through his being in the dance of light and flowers – rather like the “Little Flowers of St Francis”:

Unselfconscious as the loveliest of flowers
He grows – and here we enter: the house stands yet,
But the joists winge under our footsteps.⁴⁴

He is marked out as “different” and treated like the stranger whose very existence contravenes the social construction of being that is forced upon us all. But in another paradox, his suffering stands for all human suffering and the reaction against it. Webb’s poetry here speaks of the terrible violence meted out to the Homosexual, thus aligning him also with the innocent Christ figure, he who was most “despised and rejected of men”:

Now the God,
The beginning, the joy, give way to boots and footmarks.
Pale glass faces contorted in hate or merriment
Embody him; and words and arbitrary laws.
He is embodied, he weeps – and all mankind,
Which is the face, the glass even, weeps with him.⁴⁵

Those footsteps are us, our “pale glass faces contorted into hate and merriment” – contorted, distorted and somehow no longer fully human. All other men, in whom fear of his homosexuality burdens him with their hatred, become his greatest terror. When all becomes known to his family his “father stops speaking, fingers some papers on the desk.” The boy is committed to Ward Two, although he is not mentally ill. Therein, he takes on the mantle of a Christ-figure. Francis Webb is unambiguous in his recognition of the way to God coming from the parallel lines of relation:

Again I am tempted, with the Great,
To see in ugliness and agony a way to God:
Worse I am tempted to say he has found God
Because we cannot contort our faces in merriment,
And we are one of the Twelve Tribes – he our king.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 320.

⁴⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 320.

The community of Ward Two is thus a product of his spiritual gaze. Against all his insecurities, the poet acknowledges the Homosexual has found peace in this community of marginalized humanity. Whatever social discourses are violated by his very being, in his love for all humanity his violations become transubstantiated into a path to God. The alchemical transmutation of base metals into gold is, like it was for Harry, accomplished through an act of address, which is grasped in its holiness by the poet in spite of his fear:

He has dictated silence, a kind of peace
To all within these four unambiguous walls,
Almost I can say with no answering scuffle of rejection,
He is loving us now, he is loving all.⁴⁷

Webb creates a portrait of the homosexual boy as a transmutation of mere sexual attraction into a universal love that is in essence that of divinity. Martin Buber describes this sense in which the parallel lines of relation in loving all men focus upon the divine face of God:

Love is the responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*. In this lies the likeness—impossible in any feeling whatsoever—of all who love, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blessedly protected man, whose life is rounded in that of a loved being, to him who is all his life nailed to the cross of the world, and who ventures to bring himself to the dreadful point—to love *all men*.⁴⁸

As the Beginning, which is more than an allusion to the Fall and Original Sin, the Homosexual is another of Webb's much despised figures who, in his love for all, breaks the boundaries of conventional "ugliness" – a word also applied to those who exacted a terrible punishment on him. Unrepentant in his homosexuality, this boy contravenes the ordinary illusions of objective reality, wholly and without any malice pointing towards the spiritual heart of all being.

⁴⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 321.

⁴⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 321.

⁴⁸ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 15.

The dark backcloth

Written like a folk song, the sixth poem of the sequence grants an ironic glimpse of commonplace existence, once lived by a now failing man. His memories are bright with adventures and activity, yet they build a prison for him: “Canaries silent as spiders, caged in laws.” He lives in a past of youthful prowess but like most young men he lived solely in aestheticism. It is clear, as an old man he has not moved on from this stage:

He can hardly walk these days, buckling at the knees,
Wrestling with consonants, in raggedy khakis
Faded from ancient solar festivities,
He loiters, shuffles, fingering solid wall:
Away down, the roots, away down
*Who said Let there be light?*⁴⁹

For the aesthete, once his physical prowess has diminished, life itself diminishes. He has not passed beyond the aesthete’s existence to grasp anything other than his past triumphs:

His King’s Cup for swimming, the shimmering girl,
The photogenic light aircraft spin and whirl
Out of the loam, stained by all weathers, hurl
Their petty weight against a solid wall.⁵⁰

In the refrain attached to each stanza, deep inside the roots of existence the presence of him who said “Let there be light” is still close to hand. Making the refrain a question shows the man cannot respond: “*Away down, the roots, away down. /Who said Let there be light?*” Clearly the question remains a question amongst questions. Of all the characters in the Ward, this man is the most pitiable, not because he is no longer able to live the youthful aesthete’s existence but because he has never been able to penetrate to the spiritual core of his own life. His monological memories are walls that lock him out from himself. Consequently, there is no means of entering into a real relation with this man. While the Old Timer eventually stepped out to address the poet, being to being, and thus break the chains binding him to his empty words, this man remains

⁴⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 321.

⁵⁰ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 322.

simply anonymous, a mere man amongst other men. When no address is possible, other people are unable to come closer to the spiritual heart of existence through him. Here we see the ethical consequences for those around the man for they are failed by him and his preoccupation with his past. Like the Old Timer before he finally addressed the poet, this man is locked into a monologue for which no other person will be admitted. Consequently, he never rises above the anonymity to which he has condemned himself. His being is, as a result, placed into serious jeopardy:

Three weeks under the indigent paid-off clock:
He pulls from his photograph album the heavy chock,
Squats like a king behind a heavy lock,
Niched in and almost part of a solid wall.⁵¹

Another verse identifies him with a “great goldfish [who] hangs mouthing his glass box.” The metaphor amplifies and underlines the sense of entrapment and alienation emphasized by the “solid wall” at the end of each verse. The glass box of the goldfish and the solid wall indicate how he will never be a part of the Ward’s community.

Another portrait of spiritual emptiness is presented in the penultimate poem of the sequence. The women visiting their loved ones – “son, husband, lover” – cross from the outside public world of commonsense into this asylum of madness and nonsense. They arrive from a place constructed of “actual weight and mass” into the Ward where they think only the façades of the inmates exist in isolation:

Floating amongst us this Sunday afternoon,
Ugly, vague, tiny as the vagrant island of gas
Embracing, nosing certain unthinkable wrecks,
Sunken faces like the face of the cretin moon.⁵²

The Ward – “this place” – holds the “fugitive vessel to be kissed” – the women bearing an attitude that judges all the inmates as lost vessels, objects bearing only the appearance of their

⁵¹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 322.

⁵² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 323.

former selves but “the rest is space.” Throughout the poem, we gain the impression the women visit only through a sense of duty for there is real terror for them in entering this place. Their world is constituted by the conservative values of stability, of stasis. Yet it is they who appear only as façades:

They wait in the visitor’s room: archaic clothing,
Reading-glass, patois of tin, rigmarole hair.⁵³

But their menfolk have “spun out of orbit.” Webb again uses metaphors derived from science to explore the belief in the instability and mercurial lives of the incarcerated men in the Ward: “Gravity bends to an earlier law in this place.” Their lives might be constantly circumscribed by the stable Walls of being, but they border on symbolic instability:

Men like meteorites enter their atmosphere:
The bombast, the wake of fire, the joy, the nothing,
Known strata of repartee unveiled with care,
Ice Age of the cherished calculated fear.⁵⁴

Other metaphors are derived from prehistory to draw our attention to the natural texture of the patients that must be kept under control, the sort of control that is exercised by the women over themselves. On the one hand, the male patients – this is a male ward – are denoted by the metaphor of wildebeest – “grazing herds of space” – while, on the other, the women are portrayed as an “old planet” following a fixed course and position. Yet the gravity that binds is dislocated, she is as alienated as any of the Ward’s inmates:

They watch her blundering
While gravity pauses, down to clipped hedges, mown
Grasses, ferrying pastries for her child.⁵⁵

We sense in their fussing and fidgeting, the women can only respond as performers acting out specific roles, throwing up their own walls and preventing any chance of address. Like

⁵³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 323.

⁵⁴ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 323.

⁵⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 323.

the anonymous man of the previous poem, they live in a self-imposed monologue which serves to protect them from the apparent inconstancy of the wild men.

They have missed her absurd mimesis of cosmic war;
Her rain of trivial shapely missiles; the pimple
Of the megaton explosion upon her brow;
Her deaths by the spadeful; her dancing orator.⁵⁶

And yet Webb does not treat this display unsympathetically. Nor does he render the women simply as absurd. Rather, he presents them as the darkness against which “galaxies” stand out in relief, shining strong and pure. Self-discovery and the presence of Being in rebirth are thus made possible because the women are a commonplace darkness enabling the men’s lights to shine strongly and clearly. Just as Harry and the Homosexual bring the community into relation with the divinity of being, although they too are laughable and absurd, so too the anonymous man and the visiting women, laughable and absurd, serve as a conduit to divinity and self-discovery. The monologue intrinsic to their performances is belied by their startling advent disclosing the darkness, the dark night of the soul presaging the presence of God:

Giggling, squinting, with laundry, confectionaries,
Old women bear fodder for the universe, add their spark
To a train of time that blows open the infinite.
It is blackness about them discloses our galaxies.
Look at these faces: now look out at the dark:
It was always and must be always the stuff of light.⁵⁷

For Webb, as for Kierkegaard, the way to eternal being – Buber’s “eternal *Thou*” – is, as it is for Buber, through present, earthly existence and the person standing before one. The separation of earth from heaven advocated by the Gnostics only leads to the dissolution of the self and destruction of the pathway to the divine.⁵⁸ Throughout the poem-cycle the apparent oppositions between spirit and material, heaven and earth, ugliness and beauty, joy and suffering,

⁵⁶ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 323-4.

⁵⁷ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 324.

⁵⁸ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) ““realer than Real””: 68-9.

light and darkness, world and ward, and so on, are the dialectical conditions for each person in her or his journey to the healing spirit of faith. Where doubt is strongest, there faith is at its most powerful. This is the condition for all true faith, not merely of poetic faith. But it is especially true in poetic faith, the comprehension of which underlies Francis Webb's religious beliefs. The absurdity of the women is not discounted as simply having no spiritual significance. On the contrary, their dark absurdity provides the necessary backcloth to transfigure the separate men into a community of faith. The absurd universe is the necessary condition for the soul to reach God.

The final spiritual exercise

Something as commonplace as the Ward's sports day is the overall medium for another encounter which again provides access to the divine presence. This final poem in the sequence brings us face-to-face with Webb's belief that the apparently absent God can be found in ordinary reality. It is a complex poem interweaving natural metaphors – honey, bees and sun light and rain, the Seasons – together with metaphors derived from the Garden of Eden and the Fall. He also continues to employ the metaphor of the alchemy of gold. When encountering a girl combing her hair at the sports day, the poet glimpses a vision of the eternal, timeless infinite. “‘Wild Honey’,” writes Bill Ashcroft,⁵⁹ “is comparable to the vision of the final Ignation Spiritual Exercise where the exercitant contemplates ‘God our Lord manifest in all things [...] by His Essence, Presence and Power.’”⁶⁰

It is autumn for the earth and for the soul. For the poet “gum and willow whisper seditious things.” Something other than a plain description of autumn is in progress here. The patients of the Ward “grope among the chilly combs of self-contemplation” gripped by the sadness of autumn.⁶¹ Yet in the word “combs” there is a premonition, even here, of the vision that is to beset the poet. The fall of leaves occurs in the necessary cycle of life that turns from

⁵⁹ W. D. (Bill) Ashcroft (1979) “‘realer than Real’”: 69.

⁶⁰ Louis J. Puhl. (1951) *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*: section 39: 20.

⁶¹ Canon Patrick Sheehan (1973) *The Sadness of Autumn*: 87.

autumn through the death of winter to spring's rebirth. The sun, we are told, "offers creation one niggling lukewarm grin." The arrows of self-contemplation are aimed towards a still-distant creation. The signs are already present.

And just as soon as we encompass the autumn with its gestures towards creation, Webb takes us quickly through the "scampering at the actual frosty feet /Of winter" to announce boldly and without hesitation: "We are Spring." And although rain threatens the day, bearing the "residue /Of days spent nursing some drugged comatose pain," still the rain brings the seasons together as a prolegomena to this personal spring: "Summer, autumn, winter the single sheet of rain." The judgment of the autumnal rain proves ever-present, dampening their enthusiasm perhaps, but it is nevertheless the necessary sackcloth from which the silken purse will be made:

All seasons are crammed into pockets of the grey.
Joy, pain, desire, a moment ago set free,
Sag in pavilions of the grey finality.⁶²

But how final is this grey pall that staunches his passion for life? There comes to his view the girl combing her hair "before the grey broken mirror," himself the metaphor of the mirror:

Her eyes show
Awareness of my grey stare beyond the swirl
Of golden fronds: it is her due. And terror,
Rainlike, is all involved in the golden glow.⁶³

She is described in the dulcet tones – "the golden sweetness trickling" – of honey, yet terror – holy terror? – accompanies the vision. Her golden beauty – the gold of honey and of this poetic alchemy – provides the contrast that makes his autumnal grey all the more real, all the more apparent: his terror in recognizing his "grey stare," confronting the desolation intrinsic to the solipsism of his alienation. However, his terrified sight, "playing diminuendo its dwarfish role," no longer blocked by the Ward's wall, or his own Wall, lessens in her "self-conscious

⁶² Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 325.

⁶³ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 325.

fingers of the naked soul.” The vision recalls metaphors of the Creation and the Fall, through which the lineaments of faith persist, “as all such gestures, unforbidden.”

“O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?”⁶⁴ Death also dims before the everlasting life promised by the vision: “The overcoated concierge of death /As a toy for her gesture.” Her hands “like bees /Store golden combs among the certified hollow trees.” Fairly obvious in its references, her presence imparts a vision into the lives of the “certified hollow trees,” the Ward’s inmates. The threefold use of “comb”, in a comb, a honeycomb and the gesture of combing, serves a singular purpose – the “chilly *combs* of self-contemplation,” watching the girl *combing* her hair, and her hands like bees “store golden combs among certified hollow trees” – a simple homonym that draws the multiple threads of the poem into a single gesture of meaning. Everything points towards the *eternal Thou*, divine providence and purpose behind every ordinary moment, the same conclusion as in *Eyre All Alone*. An ordinary day, special only for the fact of sports day releasing the patients of Ward Two from their walled prison, and the simple human gesture by a self-conscious girl – also an inmate of a similar Ward – point past their suffering. The final stanza sings a paean to this divinity secreted in the interminable ordinariness of our lives:

Have the gates of death scrape open. Shall we meet
(Beyond the platoons of rainfall) a loftier hill
Hung with such delicate husbandries? Shall ascent
Be travelling homeward, past the blue frosty feet
Of winter, past childhood, past the grey snake, the will?
Are gestures stars in sacred dishevelment,
The tiny, the pitiable, meaningless and rare
As a girl beleaguered by rain, and her yellow hair?⁶⁵

We hear the subtle, hidden tones of Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, notably the second part describing the young damsel playing her dulcimer singing of Mount Abora, the Khan’s decree and wondrous caves of ice. Just as Coleridge’s damsel occurs in a vision, so too Webb’s girl

⁶⁴ 1 *Corinthians* 15:55

⁶⁵ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 325.

combing her golden hair. But although Coleridge writes of the creative poetic imagination, Webb discloses something much closer to John Donne's late religious poetry, the *Holy Sonnets* and the *Hymn to My God, My God in My Sickness*. In the end, Webb has passed a judgment on Coleridge's great poem by revealing the divine face lingering not behind the fabulous fantasies of an exotic Scheherazade but in ordinary, commonplace reality encrusted with all too ordinary suffering and discomfort.

The last line of this poem and, therefore, the last of the whole cycle, recalls Yeats' "For Anne Gregory", in which the girl could not be loved for herself alone and not her yellow hair:

'I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.'⁶⁶

Webb also passes a commentary upon Yeats. For Webb, the beauty of the girl's yellow hair is not a hindrance to the acknowledgement of being but a metaphor that takes us into the bright golden sunlight of divinity. This golden light contrasts with the shadows especially prominent in the dark night of the soul surrounding the Old Women in a nimbus of shade. The externalities of appearance and the internalities of being, external and internal, that Yeats separates, one from the other, are here synthesized within the single figure of the poet's vision. While Yeats comments upon the dynamics of sexual desire and its symbols, Webb's poem passes beyond the limitations of such aesthete desire. He advances an understanding of the relationship and what it serves, in an exultant paean to its spiritual consummation by a single vision of earthly life in community and the mystery of its underlying ontological spirit.

The structure of "Ward Two"

While the course of *Ward Two* might at first appear to be erratic, lurching from models of spiritual authenticity to models wanting in spiritual authenticity, nevertheless Webb is employing

⁶⁶ William Butler Yeats (1994) *The Poems*: 295.

a strong dialectical process of contrasts not only within the poems but between them. His dialectic elucidates the underlying theme of the *eternal Thou* lying close at hand, even for those who have locked themselves away. Access is granted through interpersonal address for both addresser and addressee. But this is not the same pallid address described by Roman Jakobson's model of communication. Rather, it is the address of one being to another, although the so-called "message" uttered between them might be exactly the same, as was the case of the Old Timer. Throughout the cycle, we grasp the humanity that characterizes the Ward, its inhabitants and visitors, even including the humanity of the truly awful pneumo-encephalograph. The eclipse of holy being occurs at its most stark in the case of the sixth poem, "A Man," featuring someone who has lost all sense of himself as present. He does not emerge as a person in interpersonal space whatsoever. He fails to include himself in the community having lost himself in the corridors of memory. He has become withered behind the walls he erected to protect himself.

We can follow the course of the dialectical process through the contrasting pairs between the two halves of the poem-cycle. The pneumo-encephalograph, the poem that begins the cycle with a portrait of the violent imposition of suffering in order to heal, is paired with the homosexual, who in the face of his own suffering is the Beginning, the source of love and peace. Harry stands for the Word, the divine logos of him who has no words, while the anonymous man of poem six has speech and memory but nothing else. Against the penultimate poem of the Old Women, who fail to address the inmates they have come to ostensibly visit, the Old Timer also does not address his fellow inmates until that day he addresses the poet. Yet the Old Women also in the end provide the means for recovering the inmates' identity by providing the darkness against which the inmates' suns can shine. The Kookaburra passes judgment on the absurdity of the Wall that isolates the Ward from the rest of the world. The bird is the intrusion of the natural world into the artificial construct of the Ward. Outside the Wall on Sports Day the poet experiences the vision of divinity against the backdrop of the natural world and its seasons. "Wild Honey" is the Kookaburra's counterpart. Given these pairs of contrasts, negatives in varying senses, we find a vision of the overall spiritual sequence that rises and falls to a

particular rhythm, and how ways of faith play out in this community amongst its doubts. In that rhythm, the striking contrast at the end between the darkness established in the sixth and seventh poems and the last poem, “Wild Honey,” reflects the dark night of the soul beloved of St John of the Cross,⁶⁷ as it presages the eruption of spirit in a vision of Paradise. That vision is granted openly to all who might partake, thereby building a community of faith of those who saw. In making this journey with these poetic affirmations, we too are invited into that community of faith.

⁶⁷ St John of the Cross (1990) *Dark Night of the Soul*.

Conclusion Chapter:

Towards an ethics of the poetic spirit

Thirty spokes will converge
In the hub of a wheel;
But the use of the cart
Will depend on the part
Of the hub that is void.

With a wall all around
A clay bowl is molded (sic);
But the use of the bowl
Will depend on the part
Of the bowl that is void.

[...]

So advantage is had
From whatever is there;
But usefulness rises
From whatever is not.

– Lao Tzu¹

This conclusion does not aim to recapitulate all that has gone before in the preceding chapters, but rather to grasp latent possibilities unspoken yet present within them. Hegel spoke of the intrinsic negative within the origin of truth that had a formative influence upon the dynamism of its development.² One way of conceiving this negative lies in the metaphor of the negative within the shaping mould, that which was a major technique of the iron foundries just then radically changing the face Europe. Already, the dialectical conception of the negative and positive was contributing profoundly to the sciences of the time, ultimately bearing fruit in the sciences of thermodynamics and electro-magnetism. Hegel understood, even at this early time, how his dialectical model entailed a dynamic system, a major advance upon the static Classical order that was passing even as he was writing.³

That negative space, pregnant with significance, operates as a silent shaping with a constructive presence, a potent absence with as much power to shape the course of the discourse as the concepts that explicitly trace its progress. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to

¹ Lao Tzu *The Way of Life (Tao Te Ching.)* Tr. R. B. Blakney: Ch. 11, 63.

² G. W. F. Hegel (2009) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: 51.

³ Michel Foucault (1973) *The Order of Things*: 63.

release this negative shape from the mould of the preceding chapters. There will be nothing here that is not intrinsic to what has gone before. Yet new concepts will be needed for this negative shape to be articulated. These new concepts are new only in their articulation. They each express a facet of that moulded space and are intrinsically present, though silent. Whether the whole space will stand revealed remains to be seen but it is unlikely such a result can be achieved since we carry unconscious presumptions behind all that we think and write.

The language that we speak to ourselves has so often been pursued in the guise of critical discourse. The naturalization of critical discourse, making it appear central to human thinking, has only rarely been questioned. But in poetry, a far more ancient mode of discourse is disclosed. Poetry is a primary reflection of our being-in-the-world, while critical discourse appears as a secondary mode, one which requires schooling. Yet poetry came under suspicion by the critical modes of philosophy because its primacy to human consciousness seemed to imply an inspirational origin, likened to the enthusiasm of the Dionysian cult. In its infancy, philosophy, like all young disciplines, attempted to establish itself as distinct from other disciplines of its time. Poetry became an embarrassment to the philosophers because its intrinsic metaphysics seemed to directly contradict philosophy. It has been said of Plato that he was also a poet. Yet it was Plato who challenged the pre-eminence of poetry by banning poets from his ideal republic,⁴ thereby initiating a conflict that persists to this day.

Throughout this dissertation, my primary motive was to identify the alternative manner in which poetry forms a relation with the world. Since the metaphysics framing the modern world in all its manifestations relies upon the presumptions intrinsic to critical discourse, it is almost impossible to conceive of an alternative way of being. Our very conceptions are rigidly bound to the modes of discourse in which they are enunciated. Even in recognizing an alternative, still the message must be proclaimed via critical discourse for it to be taken seriously. Poetry challenges our understanding of how language works by subverting the very metaphysical conventions

⁴ Plato (1935) *The Republic of Plato*: Book X, 595ff, 296ff

framing, and framed by, critical discourse. The notion of speech *containing* meaning, an idea deeply entrenched in our thinking – nothing seems so natural than that words *contain* their meaning – we call it “content” – *contain* their interpretation – it comes as a shock for us to realize this is far from true for all modes of speaking. That which changes its meanings, its interpretations yet maintains its truth by pointing true, seems gratuitous, almost unbearably transitory, ephemeral and insubstantial, and yet holds its aim in the right measure, aiming steadily into the heart of a mystery.

The surprise in the initial confrontation with a poem is the surprise of meeting the *other* for the first time, for the strangeness of a poem’s speech makes the other strange. That strangeness prepares the way for the strangeness of other being. In our surprise, a way is opened to meeting the other, not as similar to ourselves, but *different*, wholly *dissimilar* to ourselves, and *wholly itself as another*. But we must not believe the other is *incorporated* into the poem, as representation theory generally holds. Rather, a *way* to the other is opened. The poem *points* true. The true line of its pointing is the poem’s *truth*. The poem does not appropriate the other into an idea. It is rather the Word that *calls forth*. The calling, the vocational moment, brings forth the other who calls, thus forming a *pointing-towards* which is also a *pointing-out*. Poetry speaks relation. Within relation lies its genius. This in turn raises the possibility of building a community and establishing, in a community, the basis for a right relation with each other and with the world, raising the further possibility of a community of being. In our belonging to that relation, we discover also with surprise that, all this time, we have been constructing a figurative mould for shaping an ethics of the poetic spirit.

The meaning of spirit

By returning to the traditional theological concept of *spirit*, we are giving voice to something that is latent in the poetic experience so far articulated. The manner in which we take the word “spirit” needs to be defined in order to see how it relates to all that we have said. To this end, I will be calling upon conceptions from those theologians engaged in the philosophies of existence that informed this work so far: Paul Tillich, John Macquarrie and, last, Claude

Bruaire, whose works have still to be translated into English. The conception of spirit that emerges, it is hoped, will act as a concatenation of all the threads and hints that strike longitudinally through the whole thesis. From their understanding of spirit, the manner in which it applies to poetry and the poetic experience will be spelt out for an ethics of the poetic spirit to follow.

Within his theology, Paul Tillich frames *spirit* in terms of soteriology – the branch of theology dealing with questions of salvation.⁵ Amongst other things, says Tillich, the theologian concentrates on self-estrangement, the spiritual centre of the personal life, and the possible embodiment of “New Being” in community. “The power of words,” he wrote, “denoting spiritual realities lies in their connotations. The removal of these connotations leaves dead bones which have no meaning in any realm.”⁶ The word “spirit” will still carry its philosophical and psychological connotations, but also the conception of the magical identification of *breath* with *spirit*, the mystic-ascetic opposition of spirit to matter or flesh, and the experience of the human mind being grasped by a divine power, which no doubt will be articulated as a *vocation*. None of these connotations should be excluded without the justification of “spirit” in relation with them. Tillich excludes the identification of primitive magic – *spirit is breath* – but in a very profound sense, later conceptions of “spirit” represent hermeneutic elaborations of the old magical formula as a *metaphor*. Treating the magical formula as a metaphor is certainly appropriate, if only on the grounds that Tillich applies the same reasoning of metaphorical interpretation to the mystic-ascetic experience – spirit opposed to matter and flesh. Indeed, a hermeneutic of the ancient magical formula as metaphor can easily be seen within his explanation of “spirit”. Spirit is breath; spirit is living in seeking that which is meaningful to it:

Spirit is the unity of the ontological elements and the *telos* of life. Actualised as life, being-itself is fulfilled as spirit. The word *telos* expresses the relation of life and spirit more precisely than the words “aim” or “goal.” It expresses the inner directedness of life toward spirit, the urge of life to become spirit, to fulfil itself as

⁵ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 28.

⁶ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 61.

spirit. *Telos* stands for the inner, essential, necessary aim, for that in which a being fulfils its own nature.⁷

Therefore, “spirit”, for Tillich, is the unity of power and meaning: In *power*, spirit includes a centred personhood, self-transcending energy and self-determining freedom. In *meaning*, spirit includes universal participation, the actualities of reality and personal destiny. Spirit does not stand in opposition to body. Indeed, it transcends the duality of mind-body. Nor does spirit act as some special function of mind and body. All the elements and structures of our being participate in our life as spirit. The significance of the “*telos* of life” will make itself apparent when we rediscover εὐδαιμονία (eudaimonia), a central tenet of the Classical ethics, such as of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and so on. Like spirit, εὐδαιμονία stands latent within the mould of the preceding chapters. It is useful to resurrect this Greek word, as many modern philosophers have done so, to overcome the emotivist tendencies of recent ethical theory but, in the process, we will not slavishly follow an Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Although Tillich is prepared to grant “spirit” a central place in his theology, John Macquarrie employs the word “spirit” only once in his *Principles of Christian Theology*. This occurs when he identifies it with *existence* in the Existentialist sense of “transcendence”.⁸ The term “transcendence” characterizes the vitality of the human being in the ability to pass beyond the given stages of her or his condition, rather similar to what Kierkegaard designates by “possibility”.⁹ The traditional idea of “spirit”, says John Macquarrie, expresses this same sense of an existential dynamic, for it was “endowment with spirit that allowed man to be creative and responsible and to rise above the lower levels of life.”¹⁰ Whether we use the expressions “existence”, “transcendence”, or “spirit”, Macquarrie has in mind “humanity as an unfinished, open kind of being, moving into possibilities that have still to be unfolded.”¹¹

⁷ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 276.

⁸ John Macquarrie (1977) *Principles of Christian Theology*: 62.

⁹ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 35-42.

¹⁰ John Macquarrie (1977) *Principles of Christian Theology*: 62.

¹¹ John Macquarrie (1977) *Principles of Christian Theology*: 62.

Considering spirit to be *gift* and *freedom*, philosophical theologian Claude Bruaire held spirit to be the way of gaining *being*. Antonio Lopez describes how Bruaire's reflection on absolute freedom (of God) brought him to the concept of *spirit* and reflection on absolute spirit brought him to *being*.¹² This reflects a similar view to Tillich and Macquarrie.

Once one understands the reasons why spirit has been dismissed from the understanding of reality, it is possible to see that philosophy of spirit and ontology always go hand in hand. The "urgent task," the undertaking of which is of utmost importance, is then a renewed *ontology of spirit*.¹³

For Bruaire, as it is for Buber, spirit is intimately connected with the expression of a *relation* with the *other*: It can be the *other* of Nature, though it is not Nature; the *other* of language, though it is not language.¹⁴ According to Bruaire, the difficulty in grasping the nature of spirit lies in our tendency to identify spirit with its effects, mistaking the effect for the cause. Spirit always abides *within* language, thought, freedom and desire but in a dialectical moment, it *renounces* itself in these acts of speech, thinking, of freedom and of desire. Bruaire also takes a position similar to Kierkegaard: The spirit in the human being, he argues, should be considered in terms of *potential* or *possibility*: By criticising Descartes' identification of the self with the spirit as "thinking substance", Bruaire marks this twofold nature of each person. People express themselves in *what they say and do* but they are always *more than and different from* what they say and do. Therefore, Bruaire mirrors Marcel, who identified the distinction between the self and its life.¹⁵ And certainly, Bruaire also marks up thought already remarked upon by both Tillich and Macquarrie. What Bruaire adds to the discussion is his development of a phenomenology of spirit – a phenomenology that differs from that of Kant, of Hegel and even that of Husserl – in order to lay the foundations for his ontology of gift.¹⁶ This phenomenology is dedicated to the being of the human spirit, not as a product of the Kantian *noumenon*, neither the

¹² Antonio Lopez (2006) *Spirit's Gift: The Metaphysical Insight of Claude Bruaire*: 75.

¹³ Antonio Lopez (2006) *Spirit's Gift*: 75.

¹⁴ Antonio Lopez (2006) *Spirit's Gift*: 106.

¹⁵ Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 24.

¹⁶ Antonio Lopez (2006) *Spirit's Gift*: 107.

Hegelian dialectic applying divine logic to the human condition, nor Husserlian states of consciousness. The development in the human spirit from childhood onwards is grounded upon the otherness of each person. The being-of-spirit grows for each in relation with the other, which enables the growth of self-knowing. Once again, Bruaire appears quite Buberian in his thinking:

That being which does not owe his own being to himself, who, on the contrary, is given to himself, is in need of being confirmed, in restless longing for exultation, for joy in existing. The price of the ephemeral joys cannot be measured against the deaf and consubstantial longing for an eternal dwelling place of assured subsistence.¹⁷

In keeping with these three visions of spirit, *spirit* can therefore be marked up as the dynamic and ontological characteristic of personal *flourishing*. “Personal” in this sense entails the ontological dimension of a person in her or his personhood. We grasp that the spirit as flourishing consists in an ethical movement in which *participation in the flourishing of another* constitutes the primary gift of spirit whereby personal destiny in our flourishing is called forth in calling the flourishing of another into being. A flourishing spirit, as it were, serves as the gift of spirit to another and its encouragement in participating in the flourishing of another. Here, we can draw upon our study of Francis Webb’s “Ward Two” as a way to grasp what Bruaire meant by the spirit’s *gift*, for the participation in the flourishing of another is indeed the gift of one’s spirit to another and her or his participation in your flourishing is her or his spirit’s gift.

Two lessons from Francis Webb’s “Ward Two”

Raising barriers against relation excludes both the spirit of the self and the spirit of the other. In Francis Webb’s “Ward Two” poem cycle, before his true address to the Poet, the “Old Timer”¹⁸ stood profoundly alienated and locked out of his own spirit. Although he spoke the same words as before in his address to the Poet, yet the opening possibility transcended what had passed until this moment as “conversation” but was really a monologue. Poetry is constantly in this situation. We heed the words’ meanings but we fail to relate with our whole being to the

¹⁷ Claude Bruaire q. in Antonio Lopez (2006) *Spirit’s Gift*: 110.

¹⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 317-8.

mystery beyond. The words, therefore, do not touch upon the meaningful for us. Yet when the address is truly opened up with the poet, something else happens. Dare we say it? *The words become poetic*. They point into a mystery. The poet gained access from this true address to the mystery of the Old Timer himself. Even in this old man, the poet finds the sacred way to the *eternal Thou*. The words once raised as a bastion against another's violation of himself, reach to the heart of relation and point true.

Protective walls around the self do not render the person invulnerable. On the contrary, they destroy the self from within. When the self ceases to be but a particle of the barest living matter, barely alive at all, no path to the central mystery of being is possible. Such a one will not flourish behind his wall. But the Old Timer's address to the poet not only permitted his flourishing, it gave the gift of flourishing to the poet addressed. This shows both the dialectical relation between the words spoken and the movement beyond the words to the deep being therein disclosed. The gift of the spirit is the gift of the poem spoken in a very real and concrete address. Poetry breaches the barriers of alienation when each poem is spoken in an address to another.

The converse of this opening of the human spirit to a relation with the Old Timer is the anonymous man in the poem "A man",¹⁹ he whom Webb does not even name. He is merely a man, without person or presence, with nothing meaningful in his life but the shadows of his past. His memories trap him, therefore, into the failing traces of a past life. Dining on the shadows of these distant glories reduces the self to a ghost-like apparition: "Canaries silent as spiders, caged in laws." Hidden in the refrain of each verse of the poem, the simple reiteration of "Who said Let there be light?" charges the poem with a terrible yearning that can never be sated or never answered. He keeps his memories inviolate and thus they solidify into a carapace that imprisons him. The Old Timer also lived on his memories but he made them the Word spoken to another, to the poet. The address had purpose and that was the telling of these memories to the poet, but it

¹⁹ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 321-3.

was an *address* to another. The anonymous man kept them to himself and lost himself in the meantime. The Old Timer flourished and, through his gift of the Word, he encouraged the other to flourish. His address was the calling to the poet to engage and flourish, finally heeding the call as a poet in writing the poem. In other words, the Old Timer participated in the flourishing of the other through his address, although the words were the same as had previously alienated his fellow patients. But the man, the anonymous man locked into his shadows of the past, hardly came even close to this exalted undertaking.

Of all the characters in “Ward Two”, this man is the most pathetic in never penetrating the spiritual core of his own life. Without the encounter encouraged by an address to another, nothing of the spirit can be realized for him or in him, but in a very real sense he fails to participate in or to encourage the spiritual flourishing of anyone else. He bore no spiritual gift for another because he shut down his own spirit. That suggests the spirit needs to be nurtured in order to give to others. This identifies its significance as *a calling* to participate in one’s responsibility in response to the world and one’s fellow beings. We accept responsibility for ourselves by giving the gift of spirit which is participation in, and encouragement of, the flourishing of another. This is the nature of giving ethically.

Just as our flourishing comes to us as a vocational encouragement, so we call to another through addressing them, not as one who is the same as us but as one who is different. The sign of the spirit is its flourishing and the nature of that flourishing is bound up in personal vocation, a vocation that is not kept to oneself but in its fulfilment is the gift that one presents to another. To call forth that which calls to be called forth in the creative moment stands as a gift that is granted to oneself and as a gift that one grants to others. The poet writes the poem and that poem is a gift for the poet and her or his readers. Speaking a poem forth builds a relation with the world, of which it is the primary Word, and speaking that word to the world, speaks it for an ear other than the poet’s ear. When we speak for others and to others, we partake of the spirit’s gift as we give our own spirit’s gift to another. This is the lesson of Webb’s “Ward Two”: that in the address of one being to another, in speaking one’s relation with the world, one flourishes in participating in

the flourishing of another and such a flourishing is spirit in, and spirit's gift for, one and the other, called into being in a moment of relation, profoundly of the Between; a moment of real freedom. This fulfils Bruaire's description of spirit as gift and freedom.

The circularity of this definition of spirit in which the existential flourishing that is spirit in oneself incorporates the participation in the flourishing of another, points to the heart of the mystery of being itself. We are not wholly ourselves as exclusive beings until we thus participate. Our flourishing as spiritual beings, therefore, is not accomplished in a vacuum. We require the spirit of others to engage and accomplish the spirit in ourselves. In order to flourish we need to participate in one another's flourishing. This rests on a circular definition of flourishing including the engagement in one's own life and in another's engagement in her or his life. Spirit holds both as spirit being spirit and spirit as spirit's gift to another. Therefore, the definition of spirit as both engagement in spirit and gift of spirit by the spirit brings us to a logical conundrum: The definition of "spirit" depends on spirit. The self recursion of spirit points to the mystery at its heart in which all the rational categories that are set apart – such as: means and ends; cause and effect; being and doing, and so forth – are no longer conveniently separated as they penetrate one another. Yet it is significant that all these dual oppositions are transcended in a dialectic that enables the realization of spirit's intimate relation with the mystery of being a being that depends upon both our *difference* and *separation* from, and our *similarity* and *connection* with other beings.

Ευδαιμονία as the flourishing understood as spirit and its gift, introduces the ethical dimension that has already made its appearance but is not yet openly manifest. Before undertaking a discussion of ευδαιμονία and its English translation in order to explore what this flourishing of spirit entails, a brief word needs to be made on the relevance of poetry in the spiritual enterprise so far outlined. That is, we have now the tools to define what we mean by "the poetic spirit". It is the primary purpose of this concluding chapter to articulate the unspoken negative within the moulding outline of the foregoing chapters. Accordingly, it will be noticed how much this poetic spirit appears already so familiar to us. That is to be expected.

The poetic spirit

The poetic spirit captures the essence of our human vocation as a calling and as a response. It steps forth and achieves this within its affirmation that cuts through to the core of being. The call which calls the poem forth, the poet's creative vocation, is also a giving back to the world, a speaking to the world that is a speaking into being. The gift for the poet is the poem. The gift of the poet is the poem. In this sense, the poem serves as both the gift of the world's flourishing through the poet's flourishing and the poet's participation in the flourishing of others through the medium of the poem. The poem marks the concrete presence of the poet's vocation and is released, set free by the poet to speak to the reader who is able to receive this vocation and make of it a vocation for her or himself. This calling to the reader is a gift offered to bring forth and encourage the flourishing of the reader. That setting free of the poem and its reception might be what Alfred North Whitehead called a "prehension" in his process philosophy.²⁰ In a very real sense, we identify the flow of spirit as a calling from one to another, as a *calling* and a *participation*. Although the poet and the reader might never meet in person, yet still a meeting has been undertaken and engaged. I have met Francis Webb through his poetry although he is long departed from this life. He participates in my flourishing through the calling in his poems.

Even in the most basic conception of hermeneutic indeterminism, the poetic spirit casts its line of influence. We are confronted with a discourse of metaphor that does not coerce us into adopting a single interpretation once and for all. On the contrary, the spirit of a freedom of interpretation already exists on this most basic level of our discourse. The authority of the poet lies in her or his ability to release the words from qualification and set them free to be given meaning by the reader. When those meanings also point into the poetic mystery, they and their words become meaningful. Releasing the words is a call to the reader to engage with them, to affirm them and to make them her or his own. That is a gift of the poet to the reader: To point

²⁰ Alfred North Whitehead. (1942) *Adventures in Ideas*: 205-6.

into that central mystery with an affirmation that aims true within the multiple interpretations that seek mystery. Becoming meaningful, the poem is the spirit's gift.

The freedom and gift of the poem fulfils, even at its most basic, the criteria for spirit. But of course, it is the perdurance of the ontological mystery that provides the fundamental ground for the growth of spirit and the flourishing which is its own *telos*. Without mystery, manifest in the dialectic of its negative aspect of ever-present problematic and its positive ontological character, life comes to be debased. That debasement of life occurs in the limiting of existence only to function: The functions of role in work, in our domestic lives, the functions of science and the education system, and so on. A life locked into the stultifying *necessity* of functionality, without existential *possibility*, lives in despair as Kierkegaard has so ably described in his master-work on the subject, *The Sickness unto Death*.²¹ Also, Gabriel Marcel told us how a life based purely upon function will ring hollow because it is *empty*, unless there come to its aid from within its aspects of being beyond its ability to recognize them but which serve to diminish the despair that underlies its functionality.²² Our personal flourishing must begin with access to the mystery of being, emerging through our sense of being ourselves and a sense of another's being. The grasping of the other's *difference of being* brings both self and other into a sense of what it is to be a being and encourages each to flourish as beings in becoming. The gift of poetry frees the self to itself and the other to its otherness. As we have seen, gift and freedom are the hallmarks of Bruaire's later conception of spirit.

Flourishing is itself the *telos* of spirit. Spirit is flourishing and encompasses its own self as its outcome. Poetic spirit grasps the sense of being a being, that is vital to active reading, and the accomplishment of this sense's flourishing into a becoming. The sense of being in reading the poem, as it did for the writing of the poem, flourishes into an active becoming. Grounded in its necessity – the necessity of being to *be itself* and to embrace a *sense of being itself* – it reaches towards its possibility – the sense of *becoming into oneself* that which relation with another

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 35-42.

²² Gabriel Marcel (1956a) "On the Ontological Mystery": 12

accomplishes. The call of the poem to our sense of being a being encourages the flourishing of our being such that we engage with and transform ourselves into a becoming. We saw this with Webb's *Old Timer*. His sense of being a being could no longer be thought static. The poem, like the words of the Old Timer's address to the poet, breached the flourishing of becoming. This entails something of the "new being" that held considerable importance for Paul Tillich in his continuing emphasis on the soteriological aspects of theology.²³ The being in necessity with the becoming of possibility renders the two facets of the poetic spirit as flourishing.

An ethics of the poetic spirit has its foundation in spirit as the participation in the flourishing of the other. That is spirit's gift at its most singularly exemplary. The flourishing of being finds its concrete expression in the participation in the flourishing of that which is different in another and comprehending that this difference is as important as the similarities that bind us fraternally. The very existence of another conscious being so totally *not me*, is an experience of such profound consequence that nothing else can be so mysterious or enigmatic or as surprisingly strange. The strangeness of poetic speech – that Shklovsky identified as its "making strange" – might be the only discourse able to approach this astonishing mystery. Our sense of being a being unlocks the sense of being in mystery towards which the poem points within this dialectic of difference and similarity. Poetry's spiritual significance lies in its ability to open a knowing of what it is to be another and its possibility for flourishing consequent upon this dialogical moment in the astonishment of alterity. In relation with another we come to ourselves and emerge into becoming what it is we are to become. Becoming is the flourishing of being a being.

Ultimately poetic spirit incorporates the potential for building a community. A community is founded upon the flourishing of each of its members, a flourishing that emerges in the participation in the flourishing with others within the community and outside the community. In this respect, a community, properly so-called, is in essence spirit in action. When a poem

²³ Paul Tillich (1967) *The Boundaries of Our Being*: 153 ff.

serves as the origin and builder of the community, poetic spirit incorporates a social grouping with the potential to reach a right relation with the world in a community of being. Fulfilling community, poetic spirit brings the flourishing of self and other to an apotheosis in which mystery, affirmation, the enrichment of meaning made meaningful, relation and community are the primary gifts of flourishing for self and other. Creative vocation always incorporates these great potentials. Poetic vocation has the capability of bringing them to fruition as the Word that is spoken to another. “Poetic spirit” is, thus, shorthand for the enacting of a poetic vocation as it manifests within and throughout one’s existence as a calling to self and to another. In that case, *spirit’s* applicability to poetry is now beyond question.

At the heart of the poetic spirit is this central idea of flourishing. The next section will focus on what is meant by flourishing in order to identify what it means for the poetic spirit and the spirit in general. By grasping what this flourishing entails, an ethics of the poetic spirit emerges into focus.

Ευδαιμονία and poetic flourishing

The centrality of “flourishing” to our discussion of the poetic spirit derives from principles underlying ethical theory in the Classical world. The central plank of Classical ethics was the concept of ευδαιμονία (“eudaimonia” or literally: “living under the influence of a good spirit”). A short digression is necessary here to elucidate what this word signified and how it has since been treated. Our main source for ευδαιμονία is the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle and it is in this context that we can put a face to the concept. The rejuvenation of virtue ethics in recent years has reintroduced ευδαιμονία into the philosophical lexicon and raises some very significant points in common with the poetic spirit elucidated above. Together, the discussion of ευδαιμονία, along with our discussion of the poetic spirit, will yield the basis for a living poetical ethics. The shape in the mould is gradually becoming manifest.

Ευδαιμονία (“Eudaimonia”) is generally translated as “happiness”, although at least one scholar has asserted it signifies “pleasure”.²⁴ Arguing against this narrow substantive interpretation, J. L. L. Austin explains ευδαιμονία literally means “to prosper by a deity”. The gods bring prosperity to our lives, careers or activities. Aristotle insists, says Austin, on the further qualification that ευδαιμονία entails a *complete life of activity of a certain kind*.²⁵ Although, it is claimed by Austin, the nature of the “life” so designated is not sufficiently defined by Aristotle, nevertheless, that an *active life* is incurred is an important point when contrasting these definitions with that of the substantive “pleasure”. This active life can only be connected to ἀρεται (arête), usually translated as “virtue”, which in English automatically grants it a solely moralistic hue, whereas a better translation might be “excellence” relating to all aspects of life in living to one’s full potential.²⁶ Further to these definitions are the words ευδαιμονιζειν and ευδαιμονισμοζ, which seem to mean “to congratulate” and “congratulations” respectively.²⁷ These entail a successful achievement of some activity, at the same time entailing the *recognition* of comprehensive excellence or virtue. Ultimately, Austin’s disdain for the translation of ευδαιμονία as “pleasure” yields the suggestion it really signifies “success”. However, “success”, he claims, generally does not include any of the moral implications also included in the Greek ευδαιμονία. In the end, Austin opts for the traditional “happiness” but without the common attribution of designating simply a “state of pleasure”.²⁸

Alasdair Macintyre more recently built upon the traditional translation of ευδαιμονία with “blessedness, happiness, prosperity.”²⁹ It is, he says, a state of well being and also doing well, of a person’s being well-favoured and in relation to the divine. That relation to divinity hearkens back to the literal meaning of the term, “to prosper by a deity” or “to be under the influence of a good spirit”. Elsewhere, Macintyre lists a series of virtues in terms of

²⁴ J. L. L. Austin (1967) “Ἀγαθόν and Ευδαιμονία in the *Ethics* of Aristotle: 267.

²⁵ J. L. L. Austin (1967) “Ἀγαθόν and Ευδαιμονία in the *Ethics* of Aristotle”: 279-280.

²⁶ Margalit Finkelberg (2002) “Virtue and Circumstances: On the City-State Concept of Arête”: 37.

²⁷ J. L. L. Austin (1967) “Ἀγαθόν and Ευδαιμονία in the *Ethics* of Aristotle”: 280.

²⁸ J. L. L. Austin (1967) “Ἀγαθόν and Ευδαιμονία in the *Ethics* of Aristotle”: 281-2.

²⁹ Alasdair Macintyre (1985) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Virtue*: 148.

“flourishing”³⁰ thereby gathering to it all the meanings of εὐδαιμονία by accomplishing an ontological condition rather than the mere collection of personal attributes that concerned previous philosophers. The flourishing implied by εὐδαιμονία relates to the increase of the spirit as a complete movement, complete in itself and beholden to nothing but itself, that much is clear from Aristotle and Macintyre doubly emphasizes it.

The general translation of εὐδαιμονία as “happiness” is highly misleading, Martha Nussbaum noted, since it ignores the important emphasis on *activity* or process, and the completeness of life in the sense of a well-rounded and fulfilling life.³¹ Aristotle argued that the common meaning of εὐδαιμονία incorporated these ethical dimensions. “Happiness”, says Nussbaum, today wrongly implies a *state of satisfaction*, largely as a result of predominating Utilitarian assumptions. Pre-Utilitarian conceptions of “happiness” carried much the same breadth of meaning of the Greek “εὐδαιμονία”. It might be possible to argue that εὐδαιμονία is a state of feeling and can make itself apparent in this way. However, this state of feeling is itself not suggested by the term. Like Macintyre, Nussbaum opts for the term “flourishing” and “human flourishing” to translate “εὐδαιμονία”.

The idea of εὐδαιμονία as *flourishing* will serve as the focus for our study of an ethics of the poetic spirit. I argue that this thinking on εὐδαιμονία lies implicit within all that has gone before, unspoken until this concluding chapter but still attending as a dialectical negative and potent absence influencing the formation of each stage. The flourishing of the human spirit is clearly present in poetic mystery, especially in personal enrichment and poetic affirmation, but more so in poetic relation, poetic vocation and the proclamation of a poetic community, especially in the *kerygma* of its proclaiming call, in which all participants will flourish as ethical beings. That these modes of existence, present or possible in poetry, serve as on-going *activity* undertaken in being by beings and never to reach final completion, means that we are not dealing with either passivity, even though a high degree of reflection is invoked, or a non-evolving static

³⁰ Alasdair Macintyre (1999) *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings need the Virtues*: 64-5.

³¹ Martha C. Nussbaum (1994) *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*: n 15.

state that once achieved is complete unto itself. Nor are we dealing with that which is a *means* to an *end*. Poetry does not *cause* human flourishing, nor does it present itself as the *means* for which personal flourishing is its end. Poetry *is* personal flourishing.

It has been pointed out on many occasions that in Chapter 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle describes εὐδαιμονία as an *end* (*telos*) for its own sake, and as the ultimate *good*.³² That leads Aristotle in Chapter 7 to determine εὐδαιμονία to be final, self-sufficient and the end of action. How are we to take this in relation to personal flourishing as an on-going activity that cannot be completed by the achievement of a final form? Aristotle argues that if there were but one *telos* (τελος) of action, then this would be its good, and if there were more, these many would be the action's good. Certainly, there will be more than one good but some of these lie outside the action or its products and, thus, they cannot be *telos* of this action. That is, they are not *teleia* (τελεια) or "final". Either the single end will be *teleion* (τελειον) or that end which is most *teleion*. Aristotle introduced the word *teleion* in order to distinguish between ends desired for themselves and ends as means to other ends.³³ Were an action that is sought for its own sake still to act as a way towards another action, the second action is deemed final or most *teleion*. Degree of finality serves to distinguish between relative finalities that, although final, serve other ends and that which is unqualifiedly final (τελειον απλωζ). Εὐδαιμονία acts as this unqualified finality, the final finality, the final of the final. There might be plenty of experiences we value for themselves – like pleasure and virtue – yet they are valued precisely for the sake of the εὐδαιμονία within them. On the other hand, none of these things will be the aim for εὐδαιμονία. Personal flourishing can be identified as the *telos* for an ethics of living. Yet finality here need not imply a temporal finality: that we do this in order that the last outcome will be at its end. No, finality, in this regard, bears more on what Paul Tillich called "ultimate concern" which is always present. Εὐδαιμονία is active and on-going as its own *telos*. That also implies personal

³² J. L. Ackrill (1980) "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*" in Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg ed. (1980) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*: 20.

³³ J. L. Ackrill (1980) "Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*": 21.

flourishing is the most good and not merely a good amongst other goods.³⁴ Something can only be considered a *good* to the extent it engages in personal flourishing. As recognized by Paul Tillich, the *telos* of the spirit calls for “the inner directedness of life toward spirit, the urge of life to become spirit, to fulfil itself as spirit.”³⁵ Spirit, fulfilled as such, is the personal flourishing reaching outwards to other beings, to other creatures, above all to other people. The flourishing of the spirit, therefore, accomplishes the condition of εὐδαιμονία.

The most fundamental ethical principle lies in the participation in the flourishing of another as a gift to that person, although her or his flourishing will, as likely, be quite different from one’s own way of flourishing. This personal flourishing is the spirit’s gift of a vocational calling spoken to another as a kerygmatic calling. This is the implication of the poetic kerygma as origin and builder of community. Poetry accomplishes the vocation of the poet to call forth that also calls forth the reader in a vocation that, when it is taken up as a gift to others, that calling becomes the kerygma for a community. Kerygma, as proclamation, serves as the origin and builder of the relation between person and person that bears the hallmark of a community; the Word that is spoken and heard. Εὐδαιμονία fulfils kerygma in the divinity of the human being proclaimed as a calling. Poetic flourishing, therefore, stands for the fulfilment of the human spirit through heeding the call of the poem and giving that *call to become* to another, different being.

Poetic flourishing in ecstasy

In the mystery of poetic metaphor, we discovered an indefinite number of interpretations, and while that mystery, therefore, presented infinite meanings, nevertheless, those interpretations were neither gratuitous nor made meaningless by an infinite and universal relativity. The infinite in mystery made each interpretation meaningful because it contained within it the restatement of the metaphor such that it pointed towards the mystery. Some infinities are larger than others. This is well known in mathematics, where, for example, the infinity of integers is “smaller” than

³⁴ J. L. Ackrill (1980) “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*”: 21.

³⁵ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 276.

the infinity of fractions. The same can be said for the infinity of meanings in, say, a small lyrical poem and the infinity of meanings in a human being. We can grasp, as human beings, the mystery of a person through the mystery in ourselves. Yet, the smaller infinity in the poem can also touch the human in a very profound way. There in the poem we touch the infinite in an exhilarating way. Our flourishing and participating in the flourishing of another grows from this moment of exhilaration.

Our becoming as finite beings is a *passing beyond* being into including something more. The cycle of change will be understood as *becoming*. Flourishing means the coming into being of something more than the finite being that defines the self. We begin in the necessity (or facticity) of our current being and reach outward towards new possibility, which either we grasp and hold to ourselves or else it remains but an unrealized daydream. By participating in the flourishing of another, we comprehend further possibilities of being that engender a living response in us. Flourishing and the participation in the flourishing of another constitute the essence of becoming in a matrix of poetic relations. Therefore, the poetic spirit fulfils itself in becoming through this twofold flourishing. The intrinsic ethical dimension of the poetic spirit, the participation in the flourishing of another, arises in the responses and responsibilities engendering becoming a new being.

The largely emotional response in exhilaration of touching the infinite of becoming can be identified as an aspect of the traditional theological conception of *ecstasy*. Here, ecstasy proves to be the apotheosis of flourishing in εὐδαιμονία, as the intense participation that promotes real, sometimes revolutionary change in the person. Employing the word “ecstasy” might be considered a risky venture in a philosophical context, even more so than the risks pertaining to its theological context. According to Paul Tillich, certain “ecstatic movements” in religion have created unfortunate connotations that distort our understanding of “ecstasy”.³⁶ One such a distortion is the belief that ecstatic experience entails the abolition of the self. That is false

³⁶ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 124.

in the sense in which Tillich uses the term. Nor should “ecstasy” be interpreted by the equally traditional concept of “enthusiasm”. Originally, there was little to separate the two words. However, the ancient religious significance of “enthusiasm” in describing a *state of transport owing to the presence of a god within one* has now been totally degraded to merely the passionate support of any idea. Highly equivocal, “enthusiasm” no longer upholds its existential religious connotations.³⁷ “Ecstasy”, on the other hand, refers to a state of “standing outside of one’s self” by which the mind transcends its ordinary situation. The narrow subject-object structure typifying rationalism has been swept up into a new participatory relation. The exhilaration of becoming a new being ignited by participation in the flourishing of another is properly the experience of ecstasy. Paul Tillich made the connection between ecstasy and mystery, although the mystery he has in mind is of course, the mystery of God. Poetic mystery is not necessarily related to the “elevating power of the divine presence” in connection with the *mysterium fascinans*.³⁸ Yet poetry is the only way to *speak* the *mysterium*, hence the ecstatic wording of hymns, possibly the oldest examples of written literature we have. The deep fascination felt by the reader as a pointing towards a mystery, a poetic mystery, still maintains a clear family resemblance to the relation with the *mysterium*, for it is a question of extent rather than kind:

Ecstasy occurs only if the mind is grasped by the mystery, namely, by the ground of being and meaning. And, conversely, there is no revelation without ecstasy. At best there is information, which can be tested scientifically.³⁹

The poetic experience of ecstasy fulfils the ethical movement in reality, not as a purely emotional forgetting of our responsibilities because ecstasy is really the response in responsibility. In this intense giving over of the self into true participation, new being emerges from its becoming, new being of the self but, more importantly, new being of another. That

³⁷ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 125.

³⁸ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 127.

³⁹ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 124.

might best be marked up in the exhilaration of touching the infinite of becoming in its aspects of the abyss and the ground of being:

Ecstasy unites the experience of the abyss to which reason in all its functions is driven with the experience of the ground in which reason is grasped by the mystery of its own depth and the depth of being generally.⁴⁰

The experience of the abyss, thus described by Tillich, is the existential experience of the ever-present problematic, the negative relation with mystery. The ground [of being], on the other hand, marks up the positive relation with mystery as that which is meaningful. The ecstasy, therefore, presumed in the exhilaration of touching the infinite possibility in our flourishing, is not a transport to another realm of being, like a distant fantasyland, but the primary act in becoming a new being. It is, as Rollo May recognized, “the intensity of consciousness that occurs in the creative act.”⁴¹ He uses the word “ecstasy” as an accurate technical term to denote the transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy for his psychological model of participation in creativity. Yes, there is considerable emotion. Both May and Tillich agree on this. But it is a mistake, says Tillich to reduce ecstasy to emotion.⁴² Emotional feeling is no closer to mystery than either cognition or ethics. The process, May says, is not *irrational* but rather *suprarational* bringing the intellect, volition and emotions together into relation with one another.⁴³ But the ethical principle of participation in the flourishing of another and in the flourishing of the self in relation with the other belongs to this ecstatic experience of becoming. That too was intrinsic in the chapters on enrichment, affirmation and especially on relation.

The ethical dimension of poetic ecstasy can best be determined by comparing it with non-ecstatic revelation. Now the word that complements this participatory being – in which the self and the other in the act of becoming come to ontological fruition and realization – is “inspiration”, to be *inspirited*, returning us to *the spirit* with which we began this chapter.

⁴⁰ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 126.

⁴¹ Rollo May (1976) *The Courage to Create*: 48.

⁴² Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 127.

⁴³ Rollo May (1976) *The Courage to Create*: 49.

“Inspiration”, however, has succumbed to the same process of denaturation as “ecstasy” and its cognate “enthusiasm”. Tillich lays this process at the feet of its use as a vague description for non-reflective acts of cognition and also with the doctrine of revealed truth in the *Bible*. Of the former, inspiration is connected with some creative mood or an idea grasping us, or achieving understanding by a sudden intuition. The latter creates the view of “inspiration” as a “mechanical act of dictation or, in a more refined way, as an act of imparting information.”⁴⁴ If the Bible is the “word of God” then its writing would have been merely a process of receiving dictation from the deity. Those who held that Coleridge was merely a cypher for his unconscious (Lowes and Beyer)⁴⁵ or for his “opium addiction” (Schneider)⁴⁶ hold to this sense of inspiration as an “act of dictation...etc.” According to Tillich, these particular ideas of inspiration mark the invasion of the mind by an alien body of thought which cannot be integrated with the mind as it is. His focus here lies in the subjugation of the rational structures of the receiving mind if it were to retain the so-called inspiration within it. But in many instances, it is the whole mind that is set aside, leaving behind a denuded self subject to forces beyond its ability to modify. Tillich stated:

In the last analysis, a mechanical or any other form of non-ecstatic doctrine of inspiration is demonic. It destroys the rational structure which is supposed to receive inspiration. It is obvious that inspiration, it is the name for the cognitive quality of the ecstatic experience, cannot mediate knowledge of finite objects or relations. It does not add anything to the complex of knowledge which is determined by the subject-object structure of reason. Inspiration opens a new dimension of knowledge, the dimension of understanding in relation to our ultimate concern and to the mystery of being.⁴⁷

Ecstasy, according to this model, is the capacity for poetic vocation to be an experiential reality. Moreover, it is fundamental to the ethical participation intrinsic to the poetic community. This does not imply that such a mode is perpetual. Rather it flashes forth into and out of being,

⁴⁴ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 127.

⁴⁵ John Livingston Lowes. (1932) *The Road to Xanadu* and: Werner W. Beyer (1963) *The Enchanted Forest*.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Schneider. (1953) *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan*.

⁴⁷ Paul Tillich (1953) *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*: 127.

the participatory moments binding its community, either “from the centre of fierce art”⁴⁸ or gently, subtly, insinuating itself through the words we whisper to one another.

A sketch for an ethics of the poetic spirit

The conception of εὐδαιμονία as *unqualified personal flourishing*, however, might possibly be mistaken for the flourishing of the self alone, without connection to the flourishing of any other. A complaint against Aristotle has been his tendency to egoism by placing his emphasis upon the agent’s prudent pursuit of well-being, without consideration of the well-being of others.⁴⁹ Although “choosing yourself” marks the primary movement into the ethical stage of Kierkegaard, nevertheless, ethics must resist stalling at this first act. Kierkegaard’s focus on love and relation justifies the view of choosing the self as only the first act in crossing into the ethico-religious stage. Contrary to Kierkegaard’s belief that, upon entering the ethical stage, one always chooses the good,⁵⁰ there is also the possibility of a demonic “choosing yourself” that stops at the interface with the ethical. In the *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard discusses the act of sin that derives from not choosing the good on the threshold to the ethico-religious stage.⁵¹ Another example of such defiance is in Albert Camus’s novel *The Fall*, featuring a monologue by a character, ironically named Jean-Baptiste Clamence (after John the Baptist), who, at the same time, undermines the vanity and complacency of modern morality and reveals its essential corruption. Yet, although Jean-Baptiste *chose himself*, he stumbled at the threshold to the ethical stage by choosing the demonic in the form of an empty mask: “This, alas, is what I am!”⁵² While it is clear he is still living in despair, he has converted his previous aesthetic indifference into an act of wrongdoing against the ethical good he is defiant against. His speech is neither an address as such nor a dialogue. We never hear the voices of others: Only the voice of him holding forth. His is a total egoism, within which he is trapped in a mode of demonic solipsism.

⁴⁸ Francis Webb (2011) *Collected Poems*: 95.

⁴⁹ Christopher Hugh Toner (2006) “Aristotelian Well-Being: A Response to L. W. Sumner’s Critique”: 218-231.

⁵⁰ Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 487.

⁵¹ Søren Kierkegaard. (1980) *The Sickness Unto Death*: 67-74.

⁵² Albert Camus (1963) *The Fall*: 102-3.

Should flourishing result in egoism, most likely this would be because of a rationalist interpretation of “person” and “personal” as pertaining only to a subject as an “individual” and its “subjectivity”. If poetry has shown us anything, it is how the “personal” does not halt at the borders of the self, but reaches out towards all that is personal in our relation with the world as a whole. The *personal realm* is not co-extensive with the *private realm* because it includes both private and public dimensions of our being. The private realm can be quite as bit as impersonal as the public realm. The poetic spirit presumes the ethical movement of *participating in the flourishing of another*. Indeed, the gift of participating in the flourishing of another is the primary ethical movement of the poetic spirit.

Being and becoming-as-flourishing is spirit upon which a self-flourishing depends, entailing both self-flourishing and the participation in the personal flourishing of another. Kierkegaard wrote: “But he who cannot reveal himself cannot love, and he who cannot love is the unhappiest of all.”⁵³ One cannot flourish as a whole person until one participates in the flourishing of another as a gift of one’s own spirit. The flourishing of the spirit requires participating in the flourishing of another, entailing an ethical movement that can be stated as the primary gift of the spirit, both to the self but, more importantly, to another. When this gift is poetic, personal vocation enters into the conversation of human to human as a revealing and a calling to flourish.

Aristotle, like all theories of virtue ethics, describes and lists the types of virtue and their expression according to the golden mean.⁵⁴ The virtues are specified as behaviours and character traits.⁵⁵ There is some justification for such a theory. It is possible, however, to embrace an ethics that, like all ethics, determines the motivation for virtuous acts, without necessarily entailing a virtue ethics. Instead, an ethics that focuses upon personal flourishing in relations and in communities, which are built on relations, transcends the mechanistic functioning of the virtues

⁵³ Søren Kierkegaard (1992) *Either/Or*: 480.

⁵⁴ Aristotle. (1911) *The Nicomachean Ethics*: 65-6.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Everitt. (2007) “Some Problems with Virtue Theory”: 277.

in their behaviours and character traits, focusing instead on the necessity and possibility of being itself. Such an ontological ethics does not rest on mechanism but on active participation in being and becoming; that is, on the flourishing self and participation in the flourishing of another. Such an ethics is not prescriptive in the sense of prescribing rules and regulations or mechanisms of behaviour because they no longer hold sway. It is possible that an apparently unethical, rule-breaking procedure can be a profoundly ethical act because it participates in the flourishing of another, even should that act end in the death of the self or of the other. Sacrificing one's life so another may live or committing an act of euthanasia in which one participates in ending dreadful suffering, can both be deemed profoundly ethical acts in keeping with a eudaimonic ethics based on spirit though they offend certain prescriptive moral principles laid down in, for example, the Decalogue.

This ethics of the poetic spirit bears some resemblance to the situational ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. However, one should not push this similarity with Bonhoeffer too far. Bonhoeffer took God for the transcendent principle of his "Christian ethics". According to Bonhoeffer, in making the distinction between Good and Evil, we separate ourselves from God.⁵⁶ These rules of what makes an act "good" and what makes it "evil" mire our humanity in the institution of lists, thereby destroying transcendence itself. "Only against God can man know good and evil."⁵⁷ His emphasis on the necessity for God, while it is certainly appropriate in the context of Christian ethics, nevertheless, places us into an impossible position since the infinite transcendence of God as the *ultimate reality*⁵⁸ remains in essence unobtainable to fallible and finite beings like us. The poetic ethics that takes cognisance of the flourishing spirit does not appeal to the radical incomprehensibility of God to underpin its identity but appeals, instead, to our *humanity*; a mystery, certainly, but one that is comprehensible to the whole person. Even in our ethical relations with the animal and natural worlds, it is our humanity and our human spirit that steps

⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1964) *Ethics*: 17-20.

⁵⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1964) *Ethics*: 18.

⁵⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1964) *Ethics*: 189.

forward to meet the radical other and participate in its flourishing. This cannot be accomplished by holding one's vocation to be solely "God-given" and, therefore, attendant upon an *external power*, because the hegemony of such a position contradicts the humility intrinsic to the participation in another's flourishing. (If, however, God were to be either the ultimate ground of our being, or in some way related to the ground of our being, then we should not be dealing with an "external power" as such.) Acting ethically according to a theological vocation is fraught with difficulties even when performed with the best of intentions. Does the intention reflect the relation with the other person or with God? When a person does good works, will it be for the good of its recipients or for the "glory of God" or the glory of himself and, therefore, is he in what Sartre called "Bad Faith"? Yet the situational aspect of Bonhoeffer's ethics is relevant to an ethics of the poetic spirit. The principle of participation in the flourishing of the other provides the central situation by which each participant can decide upon moral behaviour. There will be no list of recommended behaviours as such. Responsibility lies with the person. When the flourishing of one conflicts with the flourishing of another, only a judgement based in a vocation will overcome such a moral dilemma.

The notion of participation so far enunciated is heavily dependent upon the idea of the *calling-to* and the *calling-forth*; the dimension of vocation within the relation. The poet's participation in our flourishing has its origin within her or his creative vocation – *to be called forth to call forth that which calls to be called forth* – that perdures in its character as a mystery and calling in the poem. This calling enframed in the poem – that *is*, indeed, the poem – calls to the reader. In a very real sense, the poet's vocation calls the reader forth to receive that call, when the reader is ready to receive that call. Participation depends upon heeding the call in response and, integral to the response, speaking the call to another. Participation in flourishing is calling-forth and accepting the response to the call although the response of the other will be different according to her or his sense of being and becoming. In speaking the poem to another, either directly or indirectly in her or his speech, the call is also spoken. Participation in the flourishing of another does not entail the enforcement of a particular mode of living but in the

call to another to become a self, to become a being. This, takes us a step beyond the “letting being be” advocated by Martin Heidegger. It is true we let the other being be but, in addition, we actively call to that being to flourish in being and becoming. That requires a *right relation* that calls for a flourishing in the letting-be. The participation in the flourishing of another is this right relation. For participation in the flourishing of the other will also encompass acceptance of difference in the other’s flourishing from the way of flourishing in the self. In this way, the poet sets the poem free, knowing it will be received in different ways by its readers; not just knowing but *accepting* that difference. Participation stands steady in the twofold relation when one is called upon to receive the call of the poem and to present this calling to another, in whose flourishing we participate by giving the call. This, then, acknowledges the receiving and the granting, that sets the poem free as gift and call to others. Participating in the flourishing of others depends upon receiving the poem and speaking it to another. This is the case for both poet and reader, even in the difference of reception. Both poet and reader receive the poem vocationally and speak it to ears other than their own. Returning to the poem, the reader calls the poem forth as a vocation calling to others. In achieving this, they fulfil the ethical movement of participation. Ethical participation requires a vocational reception and a passing on, the essential movements of vocation.

When the poem comes to be spoken across at least these three – the poet, the reader and the receiver of the gift from the reader – then a nascent community already exists on the poetic centre. Once a community comes into being, the poem that acts as origin and builder of the community raises its vocation to the status of kerygma. The kerygma proclaims the communal calling in the same way vocation is said to be for a person. Participation in the flourishing of another now progresses from person to person to encompass a community as a whole. The flourishing of a community properly so-called is accomplished by the proclaiming call of kerygma. The kerygma refers to the call in the poem as origin and builder of a community. Origin and builder, themselves, refer to the proclaiming – calling forth – of a community. Kerygma, then, serves as the “living Centre” with which the community is in “living mutual

relation”, and by which the members of the community are able to enter a living mutual relation with one another in precisely the manner described by Martin Buber.⁵⁹

Kerygma need not entail the *message* of an organized religious outlook, although the word “kerygma” derives from Biblical exegesis. Rather, the spirit between person and person progresses to encompass the community as a whole but is not a product of the community as a group or a confederation of groups. Groups, in this case, are entities that demand compliance and conformity, as many religious and political organisations unfortunately do, whereby the personal realm, so vital to receiving and responding to poetic vocation, is utterly destroyed in the collective. Within the poetic community, we might speak of “spirituality”. Each member of the community flourishes in relation to the living centre of the kerygma. That is, each is called to flourish in her or his own particular way. Kerygma is the poetic gift passed from one to another throughout the community. Thus a community flourishes as each person flourishes. Its flourishing and their flourishing are achieved in the same ethical movement from person to person. In many respects, what typifies a community is the proclaiming focus that enables the engagement of each person with their destiny as single beings in relation with their community. The destiny from the call of the living centre differs from person to person, yet it arises in context with the destiny of others in the community. Each person participates in the flourishing of others such that she or he participates in the flourishing of the community as a whole.

The poetic spirit’s gift is the call to flourish and the participation in the flourishing life of the community. Neither such a community nor its flourishing can be legislated for. The mechanisms of government can only divide and prevent such a community, not create it. A community emerges in spontaneity, here in a personal response to the call of poetic vocation and the proclamation of poetic kerygma. That allows for the possibility that one community will intermingle with other communities such that a dialogue between them might come about. Communities breathing the charismatic charter of poetic kerygma should further their flourishing

⁵⁹ Martin Buber (1958) *I and Thou*: 45.

through participation in the flourishing of another community. The ethics we bring to our relation with others in the community should communicate beyond the community to other communities.

Let us be clear. The proclaiming kerygma need engender neither agreement nor similar response. My flourishing might only be accomplished through *disagreement* with the proclaiming call. Martin Buber said he hoped for two kinds of reader: the *amicus*, her or him who “knows about the reality to which I am pointing with a finger”, and the *hostis* or *adversarius* denying this reality and, therefore, contending with me.⁶⁰ It is the adversary of whom I speak here. Yet, although the adversary stands *against* this kerygma’s call, nevertheless, her or his flourishing still is founded in relation to its proclamation. This perhaps is the point at which the ethical movement appears at its starkest. If one participates in the flourishing of another who stands in direct opposition, yet continue to participate, then one acts truly ethically. That implies the freedom of the spirit that one is granted in vocation to be oneself in relation to the world is the gift one gives to another. We, therefore, participate in the freedom of the other. The community depends upon the freedom of each of its members to respond in her or his own way to the proclaiming kerygma and to participate in the freedom of the community. A community does not come into being with every person marching in step according to identical interpretation. That is properly a collective (*kollektiv*). A community arises in the freedom of its members to respond as they are and as they will become. A community encompasses otherness. An ethics of the poetic spirit thus encourages participation in the flourishing of difference. In the encounter with the other, difference is honoured and both self and other step forth to become what they will become. A community is a participation in the difference of becoming.

With a community arises the possibility for a broader integration with the world through a *community of being*. Here the kerygma of the poem as *myth* makes itself most apparent. Myth is no mere “primitive magic” that should eventually be replaced by the rationalism of science.

⁶⁰ Martin Buber (1965a) *Between Man and Man*: 34.

This assertion by J. G. Fraser⁶¹ still holds sway in scientific circles, thereby preventing any true encounter with the truth of mythology. The rain dance, for example, is interpreted as a means towards controlling the weather to bring rain. Such a mechanistic, causative conception ignores the true nature of the dance, which is the communal participation in the cycles of the seasons and weather which has its focus on miracle of rain. Mythology provides the dimensions in which participation in the world can occur. As science has *formally* negated participation through its fiction of objectivity, it is not surprising that such a view still gains credence in scientific circles. When poetic kerygma becomes *the myth to live by*, whether in agreement or disagreement, whether in this interpretation or that interpretation, nevertheless the poem enables participation in the flourishing of the radical otherness of the non-human. When this flourishing specifically involves the natural world, then the poem forms the basis of an eco-philosophy as an environmental ethics. A community of being entails this very real possibility. Although one cannot enforce such a position, nor coerce others to fulfil such a possibility, nevertheless, such a concrete possibility exists. A community of being steps lightly on the earth, grounded in the flourishing of both human and non-human, the radical other. “One does not meet oneself,” wrote Loren Eiseley, “until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human.”⁶²

When we *become* in the encounter with the other, especially in the encounter with the radical other, we reach outwards from our finitude towards becoming something more. In the immortal words of Robert Browning: “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, /Or what’s a heaven for?”⁶³ In that moment of becoming we feel the touch of the infinite. But we remain finite beings. Yet just a touch of the infinite in the exhilarating possibility of our becoming is enough. And although we remain finite, when we give that gift to another we truly participate in the exhilaration of touching the infinite. A community that participates in the free flourishing of other beings also shares the exhilaration of touching the infinite.

⁶¹ J. G. Fraser (1957) *The Golden Bough*: 711-2.

⁶² Loren Eiseley (1969) *The Unexpected Universe*: 24.

⁶³ Robert Browning (1940) “Andrea del Sarto” *in* *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*: ln. 97-98, 433.

And that touching on the infinite is, in reality, the embracing of mystery in being and becoming. “Poetically, man /Dwells on this earth,”⁶⁴ pseudo-Hölderlin’s oft-quoted phrase identifies the embracing of the mystery of being and becoming in our mortal existence and in our belonging to this place at this time with these beings. A community of being embraces the mystery of being and becoming. In that sense, the way of poetic being and becoming embodies the double mode of *belonging*: being *here*, becoming *here*; assuming necessity and possibility respectively. Belonging is an important dimension of ethics, for where we do not belong, or feel we do not belong, there ethics has little place for us. Yet that is only a negative reason. In reality, ethics not only depends on belonging, belonging itself is ethical. An ethics of the poetic spirit, like all ethics, must include a methodology for belonging. Belonging, therefore, is more than a relation, though belonging would be nothing if it were not a relation. The dimensions of poetic flourishing, outlined above, embody the moment of belonging as a being and becoming in relation with world. Exhilaration of the infinite encompasses the moment of belonging in that which both situates the self and entreaties its growth. Belonging to a community does not remain static but evolves, flourishes and, in time, wanes. Our being and becoming brings us into community as the sharing of flourishing in the light of poetic vocation and kerygma. It is also possible that our being and becoming will remove us from this community and bring us to another. Nothing remains static. Even the embracing of difference has its limits. These are very real ethical issues to which we are called upon to respond.

Concluding remarks

Each mode of dialectical description, given in the chapters, contained the unspoken negative which constituted the following richer mode of description. Incompleteness pointed to, but barely mentioned anything like, mystery. Mystery pointed to the possibility of relation yet relation remained a potential only while it had not been articulated. Again, relation included the possibility for a community but that community remained in potential alone. Finally, the

⁶⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin q. Martin Heidegger (1971) *Poetry, Language, Thought*: 218.

complete structure embodied by incompleteness, mystery, relation and community, formed the negative mould of an ethics of the poetic spirit. This ethics lay negatively intrinsic to, and developmentally potent within, the structure thus erected in the preceding chapters.

This work has been as much an essay on methodology as it has been about poetry. By employing a dialectical method, the respective layers, and the moulding they ultimately defined, could be articulated in a manner appropriate to a philosophy of poetry, without falling into the trap of an anatomy of critical technique that would have identified what elements constituted a poem but would have negated the spirit of poetry. The sole exception to this was the discussion of poetic metaphor, determining what constituted a metaphor in poetry as distinct from metaphor's treatment in critical discourse. This enabled a portrait of poetic incompleteness to be articulated, identifying the hermeneutical nature in the poetic use of language. The reductive method would have fragmented the poetry such that the spirit of poetry could have been lost altogether, thus making any attempt to grasp the true nature of the poetic experience impossible.

Philosophy does not lie purely in the purview of the professional philosopher. On the contrary, there exist beyond these often desolate realms whole bodies of writing which can properly be deemed philosophical without necessitating their conversion into academic philosophy. The poets are philosophers. They maintain an intense reflection on our actuality, a reflection that might not employ rationalist reasoning but reflect, instead, upon the essence of beings. Indeed, just as reductionism and dialectics are justified methods for philosophical discourse, so too is the poetical method in which the expansion of the hermeneutical circle can be employed to truly reflect actuality and enable right relation with that reality. That alone, surely, would be sufficient to justify poetry as a mode of philosophy.

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